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Faculty-Student and Student-Student Connections amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Fatma Ouled Salem
Walden University

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Walden University

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Faculty-Student and Student-Student Connections amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Fatma Ouled Salem

MA, Southern New Hampshire University, 2019

BA, Arizona State University, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2023

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic expedited the shift toward distance education by forcing institutions to adapt to the limitations of social distancing mandates. This resulted in a general sense of disconnection and isolation, compounding the other adverse effects of the pandemic. Since faculty-student and student-student connections are consistently identified as best practices in distance counselor education, the aim of this descriptive phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of counselor educators during the COVID-19 pandemic relating to faculty-student and student-student connections. A phenomenological framework was used to suspend presuppositions of the phenomenon and to describe the lived experiences of participants. In-depth semistructured interviews with seven counselor educators provided data for this study. Giorgi's descriptive design guided data analysis and provided a systematic method for conducting rigorous phenomenological psychological research. Six major themes emerged from the data: (a) the pedagogical shift, (b) focus on students' needs, (c) loss of face-to-face opportunities for connection, (d) fostering connective engagement, (e) balancing leniency and boundaries, and (f) faculty need for supportive leadership. Further, four subthemes emerged under the theme of fostering connective engagement: (a) intentionality, (b) creativity, (c) accessibility, and (d) empathy. The results of this inquiry confirm connection as a best practice in distance counselor education and provide empirical evidence that can inform sound pedagogy during a global pandemic. The social change implications of this study revolve around raising awareness of student and faculty needs as precursors to effective counselor education.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to every single person who saw my potential and gave my sails some gentle winds to push me forward along the way. From my kindergarten teacher to my dissertation chair, the list of teachers, professors, and unofficial mentors who cheered me on and showed me my worth when I was riddled with doubt is endless. As my eyes fill up with tears of gratitude, I can see myself standing tall looking at a stadium full of people who are thrilled to give a standing ovation to my most recent accomplishment, the most exciting one yet. To my partner, Chris Moquin, who brings more joy to my life than I ever thought possible. To the Moquin family, who treats me like one of their own. To my mother, Nafissa Arous, the only person who will cry more tears of joy about this accomplishment than me. To my late father, Mabrouk Ouled Salem, to whom I owe my wordsmithery. To my sister Awatef and my brother Karim, thank you for always believing in me and supporting my ambitions. To my nieces, Eya, Aisha, Hiba, and Cyrine and my nephews, Malek, Zied, Ismail, and Youssef, I hope my accomplishments motivate you to forge even greater paths.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Distance counselor education has been growing in popularity in the last decade, which rose exponentially during the pandemic (CACREP, 2022). Distance counselor education furthers the mission of the counseling field by providing equitable opportunities of higher education to individuals who are unable to enroll in traditional programs (Harrison, 2021). With the ongoing and recent increase in distance counselor education programs, it has become a necessity to define parameters of effective online instruction (Harrison, 2021). The main premise of distance counselor education is the physical distance between faculty and students and among students, which can lead students to feel isolated and disconnected (Bridges & Frazier; Haddock et al., 2020; Snow et al. 2018). Effective distance counselor education depends on facilitating connections between faculty and students and among students while maintaining consistent faculty engagement and feedback (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Snow & Coker 2020; & Snow et al., 2018). Online students who perceive a sense of connection with their peers, faculty, and institution, are better equipped to have a positive experience and successfully complete the program (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Harrison, 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020).

In this chapter, I begin with a brief background on distance counselor education prior to and in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. I then provide a problem statement that outlines the current challenges of distance counselor education and the purpose of the study. I identify the research question and provide a brief description of the conceptual framework that guided this study. I then talk about the nature of this study and define key

concepts to increase the reader's understanding of the inquiry. I discuss assumptions, scope and delimitations, as well as the limitations and significance of the study. I then conclude the chapter with a summary of the key points.

Background

The rapid growth of technology has facilitated a shift in the delivery of information, ultimately revolutionizing education (Brito et al., 2018, Gunuc, 2017; Yilmaz, 2021). Technology in education paved the way for the development of new skills and enriched the learning experience by creating diverse environments (Gunuc, 2017). Within the counseling field, technology has created opportunities for multimodal training and expanded the reach of counseling programs beyond the limited number of brick-and-mortar institutions (Snow & Coker, 2020). In the United States, the internet allowed counseling programs to reach students from every corner of the country, thus honoring values of multiculturalism, social justice, and advocacy that are core tenets of the counseling profession (Chen et al., 2020a; Christian et al., 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020).

The need for education to transcend the physical limitations of in-person programs had been present prior to the development of technology (Snow & Coker, 2020). Pennsylvania State University over 125 years ago used correspondence education to extend learning to rural farmers (Dawson, 2018). The first completely online curriculum was offered by the University of California-Berkeley in 1994. With the continued development and use of technology, coupled with the ongoing need for flexible and accessible education, distance education saw a steady expansion (Seaman et al., 2018). Distance education refers to educational programs where students are physically

separated from their professors, leading the latter to rely on technology as an information delivery modality (Snow & Coker, 2020). Distance education can rely on a variety of technologies such as the internet, live broadcasting, video and audio-conferencing, websites and educational portals, and recorded lectures and instruction (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). In the counseling field, CACREP has traditionally required distance counseling programs to offer over 50% of their coursework in an online format; however, due to the recent changes and the increase in students seeking distance counselor education, CACREP changed its parameters of online programs to only include programs that offer 100% of their content online or online with in-person residency requirements (CACREP, 2022).

COVID-19 expedited the naturally occurring growth in distance education as brick-and-mortar institutions were forced to close their doors (Brashear & Thomas, 2020). Distance education satisfies students' needs for convenience and accessibility (Dixon-Saxon & Buckely, 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a), which became vital during the COVID-19 pandemic as quarantine and social distancing made face-to-face education impossible (NCES, 2022). To keep a level of normalcy, avoid interrupting students' academic plans and provide faculty and university administrators with continued employment, institutions shifted their instructional modalities to a fully online format (Heider, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, about 6 million undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one online course, and about 2.4 million undergraduate students were enrolled in a fully distance

education program (NCES, 2022). These numbers rose to be respectively 97% higher (from 6 million to 11.8 million) and 186% higher (from 2.4 million to 7 million) in 2020.

Prior to the social distancing mandates from the COVID-19 pandemic, which took effect in March of 2020 in the United States, counseling programs existed in three main formats: fully face-to-face, fully online with embedded in-person residencies, and hybrid (Haddock et al., 2020). As a result of the pandemic, counseling programs taught in face-to-face and hybrid formats had to shift to a fully online format between March 2020 and fall of 2021 (Christian et al., 2021). Though this change impacted the delivery methods of face-to-face and hybrid counseling programs, it also created unprecedented obstacles for distance programs (Szilagy, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022).

Counseling programs that were delivered online prior to the pandemic were equipped with the infrastructure for information delivery, but these programs were also subject to the effects of COVID-19 (Harrichand et al., 2021; Ruscitto et al., 2022). In fact, distance counselor education had existing challenges that were possibly exacerbated by the pandemic (Christian et al., 2021). One of the main challenges of distance counselor education is the lacking sense of community and connection (Snow et al., 2018). Online students experience feelings of isolation (Haddock et al., 2020) and must maintain a functional level of intrinsic motivation (Sheperis et al., 2020b). At the same time, COVID-19 forced an added layer of social isolation and disconnection (Christian et al., 2021).

COVID-19 brought on other challenges that online counseling students had to navigate while in physical isolation such as increased psychosocial stress (Gay & Swank,

2021; Shafiq et al., 2021; Maurya et al., 2020), burnout (Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022), and a variety of health concerns (Barden et al., 2021; D'Costa et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020; Woznicki et al., 2021). Further, distance counseling programs that implemented in-person residencies prior to the pandemic shifted their format to online residencies, which were an integral component of online counseling students' experiences of connection and support (Ruscitto et al., 2022). Another major challenge for graduate students in different fields was securing a practicum and internship site during COVID-19 (Wilson et al., 2022). With practicum and internship sites adhering to the quarantine guidelines, students not only had the added stressors of securing a site, but once they did, they had to fulfil their field experience hours in isolation (Wilson et al., 2022).

Because many accredited counseling programs found value in shifting their methods of instruction to online modalities and are working to permanently embrace the change, it is important to identify best practices for distance counselor education and equip programs with the necessary tools to continue to meet the required standards even when faced with future pandemics (CACREP, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to visit the existing body of literature on distance counselor education best practices and work to identify how these practices translate into our current context (Chen et al., 2020b; Sheperis et al., 2020a). One of the commonly discussed best practices in distance counselor education is faculty engagement with students leading to positive relationships between faculty and students and among students (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Snow et al., 2018). Students who perceive positive relationships with

their faculty and peers are more likely to stay in the program and succeed (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Further, the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) stated that counseling faculty are ethically responsible to create and maintain positive relationships with students and sustain ethical boundaries to avoid causing harm. Counseling faculty must foster positive relationships with students through ongoing communication, facilitating peer interactions, and providing consistent and supportive feedback (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Without these best practices, students may feel isolated, disconnected, and unmotivated to complete the program (Bridges & Frazier, 2018). With COVID-19 forcing quarantines leading to social disconnection and isolation (Horton et al., 2022; Ruscitto et al., 2022; Suarez et al., 2022), increasing levels of depression, anxiety, and stress for college students (Heider, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022), and causing faculty to experience burnout and other mental and physical health challenges (Christian et al., 2021; Szilagyi, 2021), it is important to pay close attention to faculty-student and student-student connections during and beyond the pandemic.

Problem Statement

Three major difficulties in distance counselor education are fostering a sense of connection to the university in online students, altering faculty teaching styles to fit the online framework, and facilitating experiential learning (Snow et al., 2018). Online counseling students rely on their perceived sense of connection with their peers and faculty (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Haddock et al., 2020; Harrison, 2021; Quarechi et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2020). Distance education can be an isolating experience for students, leading them to feeling disconnected, unsupported, and unmotivated

(Preston et al., 2020). Evidence in the literature shows that the pandemic was especially challenging for college students across the world who felt isolated and disconnected as a result of social distancing and quarantine mandates (Borkosi & Roos, 2020; Dodge et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2020). Although there is emerging research on COVID-19's effects on college students in general, there is a lack of research on the pandemic's effects on online counseling students. Because counseling faculty must be intentional in creating a space for ongoing connections (Haddock et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020), COVID-19 led many college students to feeling alone, anxious, and depressed (Szilagy, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022), and counseling faculty were vulnerable to the severe effects of the pandemic (Christian et al., 2021; Szilagyi, 2021), it is imperative to learn more about how counseling faculty and students experienced these challenges. Learning about faculty's perceptions of student-student and student-faculty connections during the pandemic can provide a baseline of information on whether the pandemic created unprecedented challenges in this area. This can further the existing body of research on how online counseling faculty can support students in feeling connected, even during a global pandemic, adding to the literature on best practices in distance counselor education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological inquiry was to describe faculty's lived experiences of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. Given the focus on faculty-student and student-student connections as a precursor to student

satisfaction and success in distance counseling programs (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Haddock et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020), and the evidence of COVID-19 disturbing human connections (Szilagy, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022), there is a need to explore how COVID-19 effects such as student and faculty burnout, increased anxiety and depression, health risks, and increased isolation might have impacted student-faculty and student-student connections in distance counseling programs. Faculty intentionality about fostering connections in the online environment has been identified as a best practice for distance counselor education (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Haddock et al., 2020; Harrison, 2021). This study adds to the existing literature on best practices in distance counselor education and may shed some light on challenges and mitigating factors to creating faculty-student and student-student connections during COVID-19.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of counselor educators of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited master's programs?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that provides a grounding foundation for this inquiry is phenomenology. Phenomenology has its foundations in philosophy and emerged as a way of generating rigorous scientific facts about the human experience (Peoples, 2021). Much like the Cartesian tradition, phenomenology puts universal knowledge into question and relies on the indubitable foundations of the human psyche as a guide in generating knowledge (Hermberg, 2006). Edmund Husserl suggested that phenomena are

best described when experienced through a presuppositionless consciousness (Zavřel, 2020). To grasp the essence of a lived phenomenon, the phenomenological researcher must tap into the transcendental ego (Zavřel, 2020). Using a phenomenological foundation, the researcher must engage in epoché or bracketing of pre-knowledge while maintaining an intentional horizon. By suspending existing knowledge of an object through phenomenological reduction, a researcher can access noetic consciousness and experience the object's essence (Husserl, 1931).

I used Husserl's phenomenological method for this inquiry, implementing a descriptive design to bracket my current knowledge and experience of the phenomenon and delve into the lived experiences of my research participants without contaminating the data (Giorgi, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology allowed me to reach my objective of describing the lived experiences of counselor educators in creating faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the researcher, I was tasked with suspending all my pre-knowledge, therefore, descriptive phenomenology is the only conceptual framework for this study (Wertz, 2010).

Nature of the Study

As researchers continue to collect data on the impact of COVID-19 on different populations, a phenomenological lens seems fitting as phenomenological research is a process of meaning-making that relies strictly on lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). Amedeo Giorgi systematized Husserl's phenomenology to facilitate its scientific application (Giorgi, 2010). Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology adds scientific rigor and psychological sensitivity to Husserl's work (Wertz, 2010). Pulling from Husserl's

transcendental phenomenology, Giorgi developed systematic descriptive methods that are suitable for the field of psychology (Wertz, 2010). Through this study, my aim was to describe the lived experiences of distance counseling faculty, which required an exploration of their psychological experiences of the phenomenon. Phenomenological research is about transcending the surface level of what the participants communicate and moving into the essence of their experiences (Peoples, 2021). Through engaging with the participants in an intersubjective process and exploring their psychological, cognitive, and emotional processes, I was able to faithfully describe their lived experiences (see Giorgi, 2010). Descriptive phenomenology allowed me to explore participants' experiences in a rigorous and objective manner, guiding me to identifying the essence of this phenomenon (Wertz, 2010).

Definition of Key Concepts

In this section, I define key concepts that are critical to the reader's understanding of this inquiry. It is important to define terms that hold different connotations or may be unfamiliar to the reader. By providing a brief definition of important terms, the reader will better understand what I mean when I refer to terms such as connection, bracketing, horizon, intentionality, noema/noesis, phenomenological reduction, and distance counselor education.

Bracketing/Epoché: The process through which the researcher suspends presuppositions for the purpose of understanding the essence of an experience (Peoples, 2021). The process of bracketing is not about forgetting pre-knowledge but rather

acknowledging its existence and setting it aside to look at the phenomenon at hand with Objectivity (Hermberg, 2006).

Connection: Refers to an intentional, transformational, and ongoing point of human contact (Warren et al., 2022). Connection is a human experience that makes us feel seen, heard, understood, and supported; it gives us a sense of belonging and affirms our humanity (Warren et al., 2022). Connection allows individuals to experience fulfilling relationships with individuals who are responsive to our needs and make us feel welcome and safe (Way et al., 2018). In this study, I will use the term connection to relate to experiences that facilitate ongoing and supportive communication and engagement between individuals. Individuals feel connected when they perceive a sense of community, acceptance, and belonging that grows stronger over time (Warren et al., 2022).

Distance counselor education: Refers to counselor education where students are physically separated from their institution and faculty (Snow & Coker, 2020). NCES (2022) defined distance education as an instructional modality where professors use one or more technologies to teach content to students. Distance education therefore refers to education that takes place in an online format using the internet.

Horizon: The concept that the researcher cannot bracket their current experience of the phenomenon at hand (Peoples, 2021). It draws on the idea that the researcher's perception of a phenomenon relies on their direct experience of it, and this experience is connected infinitely with other experiences (Hopp, 2020). When observing an object, the human conscience naturally draws from a horizon of motivated further possibilities

regarding the current object to fill in the blanks of the perceptual experience (Hopp, 2020).

Intentionality: Fundamental to phenomenology and relates to the researcher's awareness and consciousness (Peoples, 2021). Intentionality is essential to the process of bracketing and meaning making and is a precursor to objectivity (Hermberg, 2006). It ensures that the researcher is presenting a presuppositionless perception of the object rather than presenting it how it was subjectively perceived in the past (Hermberg, 2006).

Noema/Noesis: Concepts that respectively represent the object of thought and the process of interpreting it (Peoples, 2021). Husserl (1913) proposed that every act of awareness involves a meaningful object (noema) and an act of meaning making (noesis). In other words, what is experienced is the noema and the act of experiencing it is the noesis (Hermberg, 2006).

Phenomenological reduction: The intentional process of suspending presuppositions to faithfully analyze an experience (Peoples, 2021). The researcher employs epoché to bracket existing knowledge and access a transcendental ego that can bestow subjective meaning on an objective conscious experience (Hermberg, 2006).

Assumptions

The main premise behind transcendental phenomenology is describing the essence of what is truly given “absolute knowledge” through the process of phenomenological reduction (Hermberg, 2006). Thus, an imperative aspect of the process of conducting descriptive phenomenological research is to suspend presuppositions by means of epoché to access purified phenomena (Hermberg, 2006). In doing so, the

researcher can have genuine insight into the noema (Giorgi, 2010). As a counselor educator who worked in an online setting during the pandemic, it was important that I suspend my experience of the phenomenon to make room for me to faithfully experience my participants' stories. It is important to note that while bracketing allows the researcher to set aside pre-knowledge, the former is still the source of knowledge and therefore cannot achieve full omniscience (Peoples, 2021). Bracketing therefore ensures that the researcher is not influenced by presuppositions while engaging in an intersubjective experience with the research participants (Hermberg, 2006).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this descriptive phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions of counseling faculty of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus in this study was on connections as experienced by faculty during the pandemic as these have been identified as necessary to student success (see Felten & Lambert, 2020). The population of this study was counseling faculty who taught master's level students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes counseling faculty who prior to COVID-19 taught in brick-and-mortar settings and moved to remote education because of the pandemic. The nature of descriptive phenomenology is to describe the participants' experiences without adding meaning or interpreting, which is a delimitation of this type of inquiry. The sample size was seven participants, which is another delimitation as it limits the scope of experiences analyzed by the researcher. A final delimitation of this study is the data collection method

that relied on online tools to conduct and record interviews and interact with and observe participants.

Limitations

The ACA (2014) highlighted participant privacy and confidentiality as a core aspect of student research. The ACA urged students to take active and intentional steps in maintaining the confidentiality of research participants. I recruited participants and collected data through online methods. It was therefore critical for me to use online channels that allow me to preserve my participants' privacy. Further, since I conducted a descriptive phenomenological inquiry, which relied on me using thick descriptions to establish a level of generalizability, it was necessary to remove potentially identifying information and work to modify them in a way that does not jeopardize the integrity of the data (see Morse & Coulehan, 2015). I took necessary steps to protect the identity of my research participants such as using pseudonyms, and ensuring informed consent (see Seidman, 2019).

Significance

Teaching counseling students produces counselors who provide mental health services to the public (Chen et al., 2020b). Distance counseling faculty must be mindful and intentional in the implementation of best practices to ensure students' development into effective counselors (Chen et al., 2020b; Snow & Coker, 2020). It is consistently suggested that student-centered andragogy that relies on didactic teaching produces skilled and knowledgeable professionals (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Richardson et al., 2020). It is also noteworthy that effective andragogy relies on satisfying students' needs

for engagement and connection (Harrison, 2021; Richardson et al., 2020). Creating meaningful faculty-student and student-student connections is therefore a best practice in distance counselor education (Chen et al., 2020b; Snow et al., 2018).

As a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government created social distancing mandates and enacted a countrywide quarantine (Chen et al., 2020c). This resulted in physically separating individuals from their support systems, therefore exacerbating feelings of fear, isolation, depression, and anxiety (Brooks et al., 2020). Knowing that distance counseling students already experience a sense of disconnection and isolation (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Snow et al. 2018), that the pandemic exacerbated these feelings for many individuals including college students (Brooks et al., 2020), and that connection is an essential best practice of distance counselor education (Harrison, 2021), it is important to learn about the pandemic's impact on faculty-student and student-student connections. By learning about faculty's experiences of their connections with students and their ability to facilitate connections among students during the pandemic, I gathered and presented information on possible challenges and faculty's ability to navigate those challenges while experiencing a global pandemic. This work adds to the existing literature on best practices in counselor education, filling the gap in best practices during a global pandemic.

Summary

Best practices are an integral part of counselor education (Snow et al., 2018). As the field of counselor education grows and evolves, it is imperative to continue to revisit and reimagine best practices to fit with the current context. The evolution of counselor

education has been moving toward accessibility and flexibility, fulfilling its core tenets of social justice and advocacy (Sheperis et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020). With the expansion of the field and the progressive use of technology as a tool, and the immediate needs of adaptation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become necessary to further define best practices in post-pandemic counselor education. Faculty-student and student-student connections have been consistently identified as best practices in distance counselor education (Harrison, 2021; Richardson et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding how the pandemic may have affected this integral aspect of distance counselor education and identifying parameters to support faculty in maintaining connections while surviving a global pandemic is essential. In Chapter 2, I present an overview of the current literature pertaining to faculty-student and student-student connections in distance counselor education and further outline the significance of this inquiry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Distance education has grown exponentially in the last century and expanded even more since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Holmes et al., 2020). This expansion includes counselor education programs (Holmes, 2020), which offers accessible and flexible solutions to students all over the world (Snow et al., 2018). As of 2019, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) reported that over 50 of its accredited master's in counseling programs are either predominantly or fully online. With the rise in distance counselor education programs comes a need for parameters of effective andragogy. While searching the existing literature for best practices, faculty-student and student-student connections are a consistent theme.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological inquiry was to describe faculty's lived experiences of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, I shed light on whether COVID-19 affected faculty's ability to connect with students and create interactive learning communities. The results of this inquiry support connections as a best practice for distance counselor education as well as provide some information on how faculty navigated the difficulties in connecting with students during the pandemic. It also provided some information on how to best support students during the continuation of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics.

In this chapter, I synthesize available literature that is related to my topic and highlight emergent themes. Additionally, I outline any gaps that in the literature and

explain how my research can satisfy the gaps. I also discuss my search strategies, identifying databases and keywords that I used. I briefly discuss my conceptual framework, then introduce the literature. In the literature review section, I discuss the following themes: (a) defining distance counselor education, (b) defining COVID-19, (c) identifying COVID-19's effects on counseling students, (d) COVID-19's effects on counseling faculty, (e) faculty-student and student-student connections, (f) COVID-19's effects on connections and distance education. I conclude this chapter with a summary and conclusion of major themes.

Literature Search Strategy

At the beginning of my literature review, I conducted database searches of all articles related to my topic, regardless of whether they were peer-reviewed and available in full-text format. This strategy helped me identify common key words in different databases and allowed me to use targeted search words to then locate full-text, peer-reviewed articles. I used counseling, psychology, health professions, social work, education, and nursing databases as my topic not only relates to the counseling profession but can also expand to include information from related professions. Though my specific topic relates to counselor education, the broader scope of my inquiry includes a variety of topics related to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, with the scarcity of information related to distance counselor education during COVID-19, it was important to expand the scope of my literature review to include distance education in related fields.

While searching for scholarly, peer-reviewed literature related to my topic, I used the following databases: APA PsycInfo (formerly PsycInfo), SAGE Journals, SocINDEX with full text, Taylor and Francis Online, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Science Direct, ProQuest Health and Medical Collection, ProQuest Nursing and Allied Health Database, and CINAHL & MEDLINE Combined Search. I also used Google Scholar to help me conduct a broader search and access a variety of databases. Moreover, I used the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) website, CACREP's website, and the American Counseling Association (ACA)'s website to gather current data on distance counselor education.

It is noteworthy that literature related to distance counselor education during COVID-19 is scarce due to the novelty of the virus. During my initial search, I located 36 articles related to distance counselor education and only three of those articles discussed distance counselor education during COVID-19. I was also able to locate many articles related to student-faculty relationships as well as student and faculty engagement. As defined in Chapter 1, student-faculty relationships and engagement are strong indicators of positive connections, so I included these articles in my literature review. To mitigate the challenges of locating articles specifically related to my topic, I relied mainly on two strategies: (a) search for relevant articles in the reference lists of the few articles that I located and (b) find current doctoral dissertations related to my topic and find sources in their literature review section. I limited my initial search to current, peer-reviewed sources published between 2017 and 2022, then later expanded my search to include older sources that are relevant to the history of my topic and conceptual framework.

I included these search terms: *counselor education, counselor training, distance counselor education, distance counselor education*, student connection, faculty-student connection, *social relationship and counselor education, COVID-19, counselor education and COVID-19, distance counselor education and best practices, education and connection, online student engagement, faculty-student relationships*, and *education and interpersonal relationships*. The criteria for inclusion in the review were: (a) articles related to education in the helping professions during COVID-19, (b) relevance to distance counselor education, and (c) relevance to COVID-19's effects on education and interpersonal relationships or connections. I did not limit myself to articles written in English as I am trilingual and was able to use Google translator to understand an article originally written in Czech. Finally, I used these search terms to locate literature related to my conceptual framework: *phenomenology, Husserl, descriptive phenomenology, Giorgi*, and *transcendental phenomenology*.

Conceptual Framework

Edmund Husserl was a German philosopher and mathematician whose efforts to systematize a way of investigating "Absolute Knowledge" resulted in the establishment of the school of phenomenology (Hermberg, 2006). By "Absolute Knowledge," Husserl referred to the essence of human consciousness and what can be identified as absolute and potentially universal. This is achievable through a process of reduction where knowledge of the external world is suspended, allowing the individual to tap into a subjective pole of consciousness called the transcendental ego (Hermberg, 2006). The transcendental ego then acts as a starting point, bestowing meaning on experienced

phenomena (Zavřel, 2020). Husserl (1913) explained that things are as we experience them to be. Phenomena are therefore best described when experienced through a presuppositionless lens.

Husserl's phenomenology bridges the gap between relativism and atomistic epistemology (Hermberg, 2006). It provides a framework where the transcendental ego can engage in an intersubjective description of an experienced phenomenon (Hermberg, 2006). The core of this phenomenology is finding universal, objective knowledge that is neither contaminated by presuppositions nor confined to solipsistic views (Hermberg, 2006). Husserlian phenomenology focuses on genuine insights of lived phenomena (Hermberg, 2006). Through a process of phenomenological epoché, the individual suspends unsubstantiated presuppositions to experience the essence of a phenomenon. To truly understand a phenomenon, individuals must acknowledge and set aside the mental barriers and preconceptions that influence their judgment (Husserl, 1931_.

It is noteworthy that phenomenology as a philosophy is naturally descriptive rather than empirical and that while it provides a philosophical framework, it is not a systematized scientific practice (Giorgi, 2010). Researchers using a phenomenological method must be aware of the gap between phenomenology as a philosophy and its scientific applications. Amedeo Giorgi based his work on Husserl's philosophical method adding scientific rigor and psychological sensitivity (Wertz, 2010). Giorgi devoted almost 50 years of his career to developing systematic descriptive methods that would make Husserl's transcendental phenomenology applicable to research in the field of psychology (Wertz, 2010). The aim is to use the process of eidetic reduction to identify the essential

constructs of a lived phenomenon (Hermberg, 2006). The researcher brackets predispositions and engages in an intersubjective process with the research participants to faithfully describe their experiences (Hermberg, 2006).

Rationale for Framework

Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology is an explicit, orderly method that guides the researcher through a rigorous and systematic process (Wertz, 2010). It is also one of the most well developed and highly regarded methods (Gill, 2020). As the researcher, I suspended my pre-knowledge, setting aside all other theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Phenomenological reduction allows the individual to derive a priori statements about the self then engage in a process of constitution, where consciousness interacts with the lived phenomenon to generate meaning (Hermberg, 2006). This is a process that requires intentionality, so it is important to be guided by a well-established framework.

Furthermore, Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology is used to identify the essence of a psychological phenomenon through the lens of those experiencing it and allows the researcher to fully examine each participant's experience (Gill, 2020). The aim of my research was to explore the perceptions of my participants of their lived experiences, or in Giorgi's terms identify "meaning units," then find out which of these meaning units are essential, which is completed via Husserl's imaginative variation. Descriptive phenomenology allowed me to investigate my participants' descriptions of their lived experiences and report them without contaminating the data with my pre-knowledge. This framework aligns well with my research problem, purpose, and question, as it allows

for a rigorous examination of the lived experiences of my participants. Descriptive phenomenology is an intuitive process that allows the researcher to capture the genuine variations of a psychological phenomenon and reduce it to its pure essence (Giorgi, 2012). This matches the goal of my research as I aimed to articulate a raw and faithful description of my participants' lived experiences (see Shelton & Bridges, 2019).

Literature Review of Key Concepts

In this section, I provide a thorough review of the available literature related to distance counselor education during COVID-19 and faculty-student and student-student connections. I present themes that emerged from my search and funnel them from a broad search of my topic to a more specific and targeted one. I synthesize relevant and current literature that relates to each of my major themes: distance counselor education, counselor education during COVID-19, and the effects of COVID-19 on student-faculty and student-student connections. I further outline the limitations of the reviewed sources and identify research gaps, justifying the need for my proposed inquiry. I begin by outlining the benefits and challenges inherent to distance counselor education, then I discuss COVID-19 and its impacts on students and faculty and later discuss the importance of faculty-student and student-student connections and the challenges presented by COVID-19.

Distance Counselor Education

The U.S Department of Education's Office of Post-secondary Education (OPE) adopted the term *distance education* to refer to programs where students are physically separated from their teachers (Snow & Coker, 2020). As of 2019, CACREP reported 69

accredited master's programs that are considered distance education. Of these 69 distance counselor education programs, 34 are clinical mental health counseling programs (Snow & Coker, 2020). These statistics are expected to grow due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Haddock et al., 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a; Snow et al., 2020). Although distance counselor education requires a shift from a favored brick-and-mortar environment to one that is fully online, there is evidence in the literature for its viability (Haddock et al., 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a; Snow & Coker, 2020). In the next few sections, I will synthesize current literature on the benefits and challenges of distance counselor education and how it was affected by COVID-19. As defined in Chapter 1, I will use the term distance counselor education in referring to counselor education programs where learning takes place in an online classroom.

Benefits

Distance counselor education started gaining popularity in the late 1990s and revolutionized the field of counselor education (Sheperis et al., 2020b). Despite the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of distance counselor education, two of its most recognized benefits are flexibility and accessibility. With the growing need for counselors not only nationwide but also worldwide, distance education makes counselor training accessible to virtually anyone anywhere (Kurzman, 2019; Snow & Coker, 2020; Vincenzes & Drew, 2017). Distance counselor education allows individuals who are constrained by strenuous circumstances to engage in higher education (Dixon-Saxon & Buckely, 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a). There is also a sense of autonomy and self-complacency that adult learners experience in an online learning

environment (Snow & Coker, 2020). Furthermore, distance counselor education does not restrict students to rigid schedules, which expands the learning space to adult learners who are tethered to other responsibilities (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Kurzman, 2019; Snow & Coker, 2020; Vincenzes & Drew, 2017). In this sense, the online format broadens the scope of counselor education and expands its reach beyond the geographic and socioeconomic limitations inherent to brick-and-mortar higher education.

By expanding counselor education beyond the physical and geographical limits, distance counseling programs not only provide access to students from across the world, but they also prepare individuals in rural and marginalized communities to provide much needed services. Distance education can be described as a “democratizing force,” which aligns with the values of equity and social justice that the counseling profession encourages (Harrison, 2021). Distance counselor education fosters equity by making counselor education accessible to students in underserved communities (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020). By expanding the reach of counselor education to rural areas, distance counselor education potentially arms these communities with counselors to serve them. Distance education also facilitates the recruitment of educators from all over the country, potentially enhancing the quality of instruction (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Harrison, 2021).

Distance education also enhances the quality of learning by creating a diverse learning environment that fosters multicultural awareness (Harrison, 2021). Counselors perceive multiculturalism as an indispensable aspect of social justice (Chen et al., 2020b). Counselor educators aim to enhance students’ understanding of power, privilege, and

oppression on individual and systemic levels (Brashear & Thomas, 2020; Christian et al., 2021; Harrison, 2021). Counselor education is inherently established on the foundation of multicultural awareness, tolerance, and acceptance. In fact, the ACA (2014) noted that embracing multiculturalism and honoring differences is one of the five core professional values of the counseling profession (p. 3). The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) urges counselor educators to infuse multiculturalism and social justice in the curriculum and to train students and supervisees to effectively implement multicultural competencies. Distance counselor education therefore has the potential to produce more culturally competent counselors.

Challenges

Despite the prevalence and documented effectiveness of distance counselor education, one of the consistently voiced concerns within the counselor education community is the effectiveness of the online format. In both the counseling and social work education fields, there remains a level of skepticism about the ability of distance education in providing the necessary training to develop competencies required in a relational profession (Harrison, 2021). Several authors mirrored these findings that some counselor educators are apprehensive toward distance education as they believe that it goes against the interpersonal nature of the field (Haddock et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Wretman & Macy, 2016). Some counselor educators also voiced concerns about the pedagogical shift and whether essential counseling knowledge and competencies can be taught in an online environment (Lee et al., 2019; Sheperis et al., 2020b).

Despite the reluctance of some counselor educators, outcome studies in the fields of counselor and social work education yielded sufficient evidence that distance education is equivalent in effectiveness to its face-to-face counterpart (Haddock et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Wretman & Macy, 2016). Wretman and Macy (2016) conducted a systematic review of 38 studies conducted between 1997 and 2011, assessing the effectiveness of the use of interactive technology in social work. All studies used a comparison group and objective outcome measures. Wretman and Macy found evidence that distance teaching methods yield results similar to face-to-face education. Eighty-five percent of the reviewed studies showed that distance education is at least equivalent in effectiveness to face-to-face education. Six of the thirty-eight studies showed worse outcomes for technology-based methods which Wretman and Macy suspected is related to the lack of interaction with faculty and a reduced sense of connection.

Lee et al. (2019) also conducted a literature review that yielded results congruent with Wretman and Macy's (2016) research. They reviewed 15 studies published between 1997 and 2015 showing distance social work as equal to its face-to-face counterpart. Lee et al. (2019) noted outliers that they also hypothesized are related to a lack of connection and relationships in distance learning. Harrison (2021) noted that connection and relationships are key aspects of successful distance education in social work and counseling. It is evident that creating opportunities for interpersonal interactions in online environments is essential to maintaining the integrity of counselor education (Chen et al., 2020b; Haddock et al., 2020). In fact, there is evidence in the literature that attrition rates are very high for distance counselor education in comparison to traditional programs, and

researchers suggested that this is in part due to a perceived lack of connection with peers and faculty (Haddock et al., 2020; Harrison, 2021; Lu, 2017). This issue was unequivocally exacerbated in 2020 when education suddenly had to move to a fully online format in the aftermath of COVID-19.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began in late December 2020 in China and quickly spread across the globe claiming a massive number of victims. As of June 13th, 2022, 535,062,191 people have contracted the disease and 6,308,976 had died (Worldometers, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic caused unforeseen and devastating disruptions on micro and macro levels, shaking the global economy, and engendering severe repercussions on multiple levels (Chan et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2020). With the virus being so unpredictable in the way it affects people and spreads throughout nations, governments' efforts were reduced to measures of quarantine, closure of international borders, mask mandates, and indefinite social isolation (Chen et al., 2020c; Zhu et al., 2020). Early studies showed severe health sequelae attributed to COVID-19 infections in individuals with pre-existing conditions (Chen et al., 2020c; Garg et al., 2020). Individuals with pre-existing conditions such as being older than 65, a history of smoking, chronic illness and autoimmune disease showed to be particularly susceptible to the damaging effects of the virus (Holshue et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020; Wortham et al., 2020). Although it was known that COVID-19 impacted individuals with pre-existing conditions, its effects on the general population were unknown and unpredictable, forcing governments to take extreme measures leading to a global quarantine.

The ensuing isolation and interruption in social interactions caused drastic changes that individuals were forced to navigate. Based on a review of 24 published articles on the psychological effects of previous pandemics such as SARS, Ebola, H1N1 influenza, equine influenza, and Middle East respiratory syndrome, Brooks et al. (2020) explored the effects of quarantine on people. Their findings shed light on the strong correlation between quarantine and psychological symptoms like post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety. Brooks et al. found that longer quarantine duration, lack of information, fear, and boredom are predictors of more severe mental health issues. A study by Okamoto et al. (2011) concluded that the main contributing factor to increased mental health problems during quarantines is isolation and the lack of socialization. They also suggested that younger individuals are more prone to depression when disconnected from their social networks.

Effects on College Students

To date, there is a lack of research reporting the effects of COVID-19 on counseling students, however there is sufficient information on how COVID-19 impacted college students in general. In the next few sections, I will outline themes that emerged from the literature relating to COVID-19 effects on college students, paying close attention to literature pertaining to counseling students.

Psychosocial Vulnerability. College students were especially susceptible to the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as they are typically prone to stress and anxiety (Gay & Swank, 2021; Shafiq et al., 2021; Maurya et al., 2020). Shafiq et al. (2021) interviewed and surveyed 1000 students from Bangladesh to collect information

on how the pandemic affected their mental health and to explore stress factors. They found that isolation, health risks, family health, job loss and uncertainty are some of the most prominent stressors. Further, Elmer et al. (2020) found that the results of social distancing and isolation on Swiss college students showed that lockdowns stunt the social integration of individuals. Moreover, they highlighted the importance of social networks in the lives of college students as they induce pleasant interactions, feelings of belonging, and social support (Elmer et al., 2020). With limited access to their social networks, college students exhibited heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Arici, 2020; Barden et al., 2020; Brashear & Thomas, 2020; Christian et al., 2021). According to Husky et al., (2020), French students who lived alone during lockdown were more susceptible to developing psychological problems than students who lived with their families and peers.

Burnout. Burnout syndrome, initially identified in working adults, proved to be applicable to students' experiences as well (Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022). From an academic perspective, burnout is characterized by physical and mental exhaustion, a cynical and detached attitude toward academia, and a decreased sense of academic self-efficacy (Lésnewska et al., 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022; Szilagyi, 2021). Thomaszek and Muchacka-Cymerman (2022) noted that student burnout is a result of chronic academic stress, constantly increasing demands from professors, family members, and society, and lack of support and resources. They also discussed how academic burnout, coupled with existential anxiety and academic fear, increases the student's likelihood of experiencing severe mental health consequences

such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Thomaszek and Muchacka-Cymerman added that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers had already noticed an exponential surge in university students' burnout resulting from an increased sense of uncertainty and lack of stability. The world was already changing rapidly and growing in complexity and precariousness, and the pandemic only compounded on the existing challenges (Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing stress and increased students' likelihood of developing severe mental health issues like PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Szilagy, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022). Preventative measures taken by many governments, notably the United States government consisted of social distancing, strict quarantine, and remote education for students (Heider, 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022). These imposed restrictions compounded on existing stress, fear, and uncertainty, therefore inflaming symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD, and negatively impacting students' quality of life (Heider, 2021). All of these factors increased students' vulnerability to experiencing burnout syndrome (Heider, 2021; Lésnewska et al., 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022; Szilagy, 2021). Lésnewska et al. (2021) identified students and teachers as one of the populations most likely to develop COVID-19 related burnout as a result of distance education. Szilagy (2021) noted that helping professionals have to constantly balance the demands of supporting clients while maintaining a sense of internal balance. Moreover, helping professionals such as counselors were not equipped with the necessary training to support their clients during these unexpected and unprecedented times (Szilagy, 2021).

Student counselors who began to see clients during the onset of the pandemic were therefore not trained to respond to this crisis. Szilagyi (2021) explained that the level of responsibility accompanied by loads of vicarious stress, compassion fatigue and burnout, make helping roles hazardous and potentially detrimental.

Health Concerns. COVID-19 brought on unpredictable and frightening health risks that did not spare any population. Although several studies highlighted the health disparities affecting minorities; especially people of color (POC), individuals in rural communities, and individuals in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) communities; non-minority individuals were also prone to the health risks of the virus (Barden et al., 2021; D’Costa et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020; Woznicki et al., 2021). The pandemic presented challenges relating to job security and access to resources such as housing, food, and technology, which exacerbated health concerns (Brashear & Thomas, 2020; Christian et al., 2021; Harrichand et al., 2021). Shafiq et al. (2021) also identified health risks as significant stressors for students in Bangladesh, compounding existing stress and anguish.

Special populations. Several studies highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on minority groups. Latinx youth for example were shown to be more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic as a result of compounding adverse childhood events (ACEs), xenophobic views, and experiences of discrimination and racism (D’Costa et al., 2021; Gillborn et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020). The term Latinx “encompasses a diverse ethnic identity that has sociopolitical implications in the U.S” (D’Costa et al. 2021). As a collective ethnic group with ancestors from Indigenous, Black, and White

backgrounds, the experiences of Latinx individuals are charged with racism. D'Costa et al. (2021) highlighted the relationship between experiences of discrimination and racism on the self-esteem and mental health outcomes of Latinx individuals and noted that positive ethnic identity and family support and functioning are protective factors. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a profound impact on African American/Black communities, exacerbating existing social and health disparities. Okoro et al. (2022) conducted a needs-assessment of 183 participants using a mixed methods approach to explore their experiences and worries related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that the pre-existing inequities that affect African American/Black communities, coupled with the underutilization and lack of access to health care services led to disparities in health, family, financial, and educational concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights the importance of culturally responsive mental and public health resources (Okoro et al., 2022).

Another vulnerable population is LGBTQ+ individuals, who inherently face a variety of familial and social stressors that were evidently exacerbated by the pandemic (Salerno et al., 2020a; Salerno et al., 2020b; van der Miesen et al., 2020). Woznicki et al. (2021) noted that quarantine led LGBTQ+ individuals living at home to be confined to a small space for an indefinite amount of time with family members who may hold and perpetuate disturbing social stigma and injustice against them. Lack of resources and family support is related to feelings of loneliness and isolation in LGBTQ+ youth, subsequently increasing depressive symptoms (Salerno et al., 2020a; Woznicki et al., 2021). van der Miesen et al. (2020) added that the focused medical efforts on limiting the

severe health consequences of COVID-19 led to deferring gender affirming treatment for transgender youth. Salerno et al. (2020a) also discussed in-group racism and noted that 37% of the 565 LGBTQ students they interviewed reported feeling discriminated against by White LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ+ individuals therefore experienced an increase in existing social injustice and discrimination, compounding the mental and physical health sequelae of the pandemic.

Counseling Students. The COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019, and to date, research on its effects on counseling students remains scarce. Gay and Swank (2021) explored the effects of the pandemic on school counseling students. They noted that students were mostly affected by having to adapt to rapid changes, continue their education under unknown circumstances, and navigate ongoing stressors such as internship sites shutting down. Gay and Swank (2021) highlighted the monumental role that faculty support and ongoing communication played in alleviating students' distress. Similarly, Suarez et al. (2022) conducted a study pertaining specifically to the impact of COVID-19 on the resilience of counselors in training (CITs). They explained that due to the abrupt interruption in routine and the lack of certainty, especially about field placements, CITs experienced increased anxiety and isolation. Suarez et al. (2022) also noted the theme of faculty support and presence. They explained that students expressed feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers and implored counselor educators to be mindful of students' anxieties and need for connection, paying close attention to marginalized populations. Findings by Horton et al. (2022) and Ruscitto et al., (2022) echo the theme of isolation and disconnection that counseling students experienced

during the pandemic. Both studies showed that students reported higher levels of satisfaction with their professors and courses when they felt connected to their peers and faculty.

Counseling students also had the responsibility of navigating different facets of grief. Ruden (2022) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an uncharted territory for counselors given the multi-dimensional losses of security, stability, and physical and mental wellbeing experienced universally. Further, she stated that common approaches to grief fail to capture the complexity of what mental health workers, students, and clients endured as a result of COVID-19. Counseling students suffered from a loss of certainty and predictability in relation to completing their programs (Joshi et al., 2021; Horton et al., 2022; Ruscitto et al., 2022). Many students were greatly affected by loss of shelter, income, and even a loved one (Ruden et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2022). In fact, Christian et al., (2021) explained that counseling students worried about themselves and their family members' safety and health and this was even more impactful on students from minority groups, who are immunocompromised, or who have family members within the high-risk category (Joshi et al., 2021; Richmond et al., 2021). In addition to navigating their own losses, CITs had to hold space for their clients to grieve. Richmond et al. (2021) described two types of vicarious grief: one where the CIT's experiences of grief get triggered by the client's narrative, and one where the CIT empathizes with the client's grief. CITs therefore had to attend to their own experiences of grief while facilitating their clients' similar grieving processes. COVID-19 created an unprecedented situation where counseling students, faculty, and clients simultaneously experienced equivalent

levels of grief (Christian et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2021; Richmond et al., 2021). In the next section, I will discuss how the pandemic affected counselor educators.

Effects on Faculty

It is important to note that COVID-19 affected students and faculty in many similar ways. Counselor educators were subject to the same psychosocial stressors that counseling students faced. Additionally, they have the responsibility of supporting their students in navigating the same challenges. Similarly, minority counselor educators also experienced the same impediments noted above. To avoid redundancy, I will discuss COVID-19 consequences that are specific to counselor educators in this section.

Burnout. Counselor educators were not only faced with the generic challenges previously described during the pandemic such as health risks, social isolation, anxiety, and economic problems, but they had to continue to function in stable and intentional ways to provide adequate support to their students. Harrichand et al. (2021) explained that burnout is a state that affects the physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of an individual and is the result of highly demanding emotional stressors. Counselor educators, many of whom are also practicing counselors, had to juggle the responsibilities of teaching, counseling, and personal life all at once while navigating an uncharted and life-threatening territory. Christian et al. (2021) explained that while counselor educators were concerned with their and their family's safety and health risks, they had to navigate new challenges and continue to function and provide mental health services to the public. Moreover 37% of faculty members in the U.S. are over the age of 55 years-old, this population, which is more susceptible to the harmful effects of COVID-19, likely had an

added layer of stress (Christian et al., 2021). Counselor educators were also tasked with helping their students navigate COVID-19 burnout while working to equip internship students with the skills to support their clients (Szilagyi, 2021). Therefore, counselor educators had to hold space for their own COVID-19 burnout, their students' burnout, and their clients' burnout, all while experiencing the compounding complexities of the pandemic. Simultaneously, students and professors in brick-and-mortar institutions had to navigate the shift to distance education and equip themselves with the necessary tools to function in this new world. Further, counselor educators had to make a seamless shift to a fully online format while maintaining the integrity of their programs, which is inherently a challenging task without the added challenges of a pandemic (Haddock et al., 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020).

Counselors and counselor educators are generally prone to experiencing increased stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout because of the intense responsibilities of their profession (Christian et al., 2021; Litam et al., 2021; Harrichand et al., 2021). COVID-19 compounded these existing stressors potentially leading to increased prospects of burnout. A study by Sandhu and Singh (2021) explored predictive factors of burnout in novice counselors during the pandemic and found that detriments related to COVID-19 such as compassion fatigue and secondary trauma were predictive factors of burnout. To date, there is a paucity of research linking COVID-19 to counselor burnout; however, in a non-peer reviewed article published in *Counseling Today*, Elder et al. (2022) argued that there was no increase in counselor burnout as a result of COVID-19. They noted that according to the results of three independent research studies conducted in 2020 and

2021, burnout rates in the counseling field are low. Elder et al. (2022) conducted three independent studies surveying respectively 211, 225, and 125 counselors at different stages of the pandemic and reported that average burnout rates were within the “low” range of the Professional Quality of Life scale.

Adapting to the Change. Richardson et al. (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm and forced a mindset expansion and a much-needed change in attitude toward distance training. COVID-19 expedited the rate at which technology was already evolving and changing the way we interact as a society, making distance education not only a favored option but also a relevant and necessary tool. Counselor educators had to adapt to the shift in format while continuing to implement best practices and meet CACREP standards (Haddock et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2020). Richardson et al. (2020) evaluated the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on psychoanalytic and psychotherapy training programs at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. They noted that educators had to navigate shifts in both their training and therapeutic environments. Richardson et al. (2020) found that most of their participants adapted well to the shift to telemedicine practices but struggled with the paradigmatic shift from in-person to distance psychoanalytic training.

It is noteworthy that although COVID-19 caused a drastic shift in the educational format for face-to-face programs, it also caused distance programs to lose the face-to-face aspect of their residencies, practicums, and internships (Christian et al., 2021). This led to increased uncertainty about field placement and students’ ability to complete their

programs (Christian et al., 2021). Furthermore, counselor educators continued to be subject to their existing ethical and legal obligations like gatekeeping and complying with the health insurance portability and accountability act of (1996) HIPAA and the family educational rights and privacy act FERPA (Sheperis et al. 2020a). The shift to distance counseling and education presented myriad privacy and liability issues that counselor educators had to mitigate. Sheperis et al. (2020a) discussed the increasing awareness of vicarious liability in the counselor profession and explained that educators and supervisors have a responsibility to gatekeep and provide proper education and supervision to counseling students, highlighting that the former are ultimately liable for the actions of their trainees.

Multicultural Competence. Bender and Werries (2022) noted that distance counselor education provides students with the opportunity to interact with diverse faculty and peers, exposing them to various perspectives and life experiences, which is an invaluable asset in the training of mental health professionals. According to Brashear and Thomas (2020) while distance counselor education provides a fertile environment to instill multicultural competencies, it is extremely important to address students' needs in an individualized manner by addressing cultural barriers and seeking to understand individual challenges. They pointed out that some individuals may feel inadequate in an online environment and struggle to request additional support. Therefore, it is the counselor educator's responsibility to anticipate these cultural challenges, inquire about students' support system, ask about their fears, and model empathetic supervision. Chen et al. (2020a) discussed the importance of recognizing the different contexts that distance

students exist within and suggested the use of a multi-axial model that combines social constructionism with intersectionality.

Crenshaw (1989) introduced the theory of intersectionality to elucidate the complexity of an individual's identity. She urged people to avoid categorical generalizations in conceptualizing an individual and instead pay close attention to the interactions between an individual's social identities and experiences of oppression and privilege. Chen et al (2020a) argued that an integral aspect of multicultural competence in distance learning is the incorporation of intersectional pedagogy. To successfully implement intersectional pedagogy in distance learning, Case (2017) outlined nine essential tenets: educators must (a) have an accurate understanding of intersectionality, (b) teach intersectionality within the context of institutional oppression, (c) shed light on inconspicuous intersections, (d) analyze aspects of privilege and power, (e) engage students in assessing their own identities, (f) reflect on their own privilege and power and how it affects the learning environment, (g) encourage students to engage in social advocacy, (h) listen and validate the experiences of oppressed students, and (i) ensure that intersectionality is studied throughout the program. Further, Thompson and Bridges (2019) highlighted the importance of infusing intersectional pedagogy throughout the entire counseling program. They noted that many counseling programs limit themselves to discussing multicultural competence solely during the designated course and that historically, the focus has been on teaching White students about other cultures, subsequently perpetuating White privilege and excluding other students. Adopting intersectional pedagogy and using it throughout the program allows faculty and students

to fully experience and embody multicultural competence (Thompson & Bridges, 2019). Moreover, Thompson and Bridges (2019) found that using intersectionality as a pedagogy empowers faculty and students and facilitates connection, which is critical during the times of a pandemic.

Student-Faculty and Student-Student Connections

Chen et al. (2020b) discussed the importance of defining clear parameters of effective distance counselor education. The authors noted that due to the recent reliance on distance learning as a tool for counselor education along with the increasing demand for expanding the reach of counselor education on a national and global scale, it has become imperative to elaborate on what constitutes sound distance learning pedagogy. Sheperis et al. (2020b) explored distance master's students' perceptions of effective distance education. Moreover, students reported higher satisfaction rates when they felt connected to their faculty and peers (Sheperis et al., 2020b), mirroring findings by Blaine (2019) and Shrestha and Rogers (2021) who underscored the importance of peer and faculty interactions as a fundamental aspect of distance counselor education. Bridges and Frazier (2018) further stressed the critical role that distance counselor educators play in fostering student success. They identified positive faculty-student relationships and student-student relationships as critical foundations for student learning and growth. Brashear and Thomas (2020) explained that one of the major concerns of a fully distance counseling program is the lack of "personal connection" and the effects it can have on students' resilience and performance during challenging times (p.217). Additionally, Miller and Grise-Owens (2021) highlighted the importance of providing

mental health workers with the space to create and maintain social and professional connections as these can be integral sources of ongoing support and stress reduction during the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggested that organizations should work to instill values of supportive professional networks. Social networks like support groups can increase a sense of community and foster resilience in the face of collective trauma (Miller & Grise-Owens, 2021; Wong et al., 2021).

Snow et al. (2018) also outlined difficulties in fostering a sense of connection amongst students and between students and faculty as one of the challenges inherent to distance counselor education. Additionally, Harrison (2021) stated that creating and maintaining relationships is essential in distance education and argued that relationships and connections are the basis of distance education. In fact, Harrison (2021) noted that two of the most reputable distance learning theories; transactional distance (Moore, 2019) and community of inquiry (Cleveland-Innes et al, 2019) consistently express that the confluence of course structure, faculty engagement and interaction, teaching methods, and connections amongst students are predictors of student success. Snow and Coker (2020) also discussed the correlation between sustained and constructive interaction between faculty and students and an increased sense of connection and student engagement. They explained that quality regular interaction decreases the distance between students and faculty. They also highlighted the importance of reducing the social distance between students and faculty as a predicting factor of student engagement and success. Harrison (2021) and Snow et al. (2018) expressed that building connections within the learning environment facilitates meaningful interactions and creates

relationships that foster collective learning. Bridges and Frazier (2018) added that due to the remote nature of distance learning, which can increase students' sense of detachment and autonomy, counseling students may display inappropriate behavior in the online classroom. This increases the need for ongoing faculty communication and support. Through active engagement, continuous feedback, and facilitating respectful communication, distance counseling faculty not only lay the foundations for students to learn, but they also model appropriate and productive professional relationships (Bridges & Frazier, 2018).

It is consistently suggested that effective distance counselor education relies heavily on three key factors: facilitating connections, consistent faculty engagement and feedback, and building harmonious communities (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Snow & Coker 2020; & Snow et al. 2018). Distance counselor education programs that value ongoing and consistent positive interactions between students increase students' aptitude to work with one another and seek constructive feedback from peers and professors (Snow et al. 2018; Bridges & Frazier, 2018). Preston et al. (2020) also discussed student-student relationships as a major indicator of high-quality programs. They argued that student-student relationships provide students with built-in support networks that they can rely on to not only navigate academic challenges but also work through external stressors. Having close connections with peers provides students with a sense of commonality which increases their resilience and ability to overcome challenging times. It also provides them with a support network of individuals who can relate to a portion of their experience and be a support for the other portions (Preston et al. 2020; Bender and

Werries 2022). Additionally, faculty-student connections increase student satisfaction and positively impact academic and professional development (Harrison, 2021; Snow and Coker, 2020; & Dixon-Saxon and Buckley, 2020).

Preston et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative inquiry to explore what constitutes a high-quality doctoral program from the perspectives of faculty members of CACREP accredited counselor education and supervision CES programs. They conducted in-depth interviews with 15 faculty members and analyzed data to identify themes. Counselor educators identified faculty-student relationships as well as student-student relationships as major predictors of program success. Counselor educators reported that fostering supportive and functional relationships between faculty and students and amongst students is a critical aspect of a high-quality program. In fact, Preston et al. (2020) stated that several participants of their research identified faculty-student relationships as the most essential requirement of a high-quality program. They encouraged ongoing and close mentoring relationships between faculty and students. Participants discussed the quality of the faculty-student relationship as an integral part of effective mentoring. They noted that intentionality with cohort sizes and time allocated to spend with each student are critical to the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. Student-student relationships were also perceived by faculty members as mitigating factors for student dropout, burnout, and isolation (Preston et al., 2020).

Hale and Bridges (2020) also highlighted the importance of connection as a significant facet of the distance student's experience. When discussing best practices in distance counselor education, Hale and Bridges (2020) identified effective and ongoing

communication between faculty and students as one of the foundations of a functional distance learning environment. Similar to findings by Sheperis et al. (2020a), Hale and Bridges (2020) outlined several ethical considerations that counseling faculty must attend to when transitioning to distance environments. Distance counseling faculty must acquire a functional level of fluency in the use of technology. They must fully understand the ethical implications of switching to an online environment, paying close attention to issues of privacy and confidentiality. This aspect can prove to be especially challenging during a pandemic, with many people losing access to shelter and private settings (Joshi et al., 2021).

Further, Hale and Bridges (2020)'s research conducted pre-COVID-19 shed light on the permeating hesitancy of counseling faculty to switch to online instruction. They discussed the glaring contrast between university leaders' expectations and the level of support provided, leaving faculty feeling lost and confused. Participants also shared apprehension toward the distance environment as they perceived limitations in their instructional methods and their ability to be authentic and connect with students. Moreover, all six participants expressed the importance of intentionality in engaging students and creating connections with them as predictive factors of successful transitions into distance counselor education. Participants also highlighted the importance of support, especially on the professional and institutional level, as faculty works to navigate the challenges inherent to distance counselor education (Hale & Bridges, 2020). While many counselor educators maintained their apprehension toward distance teaching,

COVID-19 struck at the end of 2019, leaving them no other option but to adapt to distance counselor education (Christian et al., 2021).

COVID-19, Connections, and Distance Education

The COVID-19 pandemic created significant challenges for college students across the world. One of the main areas of struggle for college students that is evident in the literature is feeling disconnected (Borkoski & Roos, 2020; Dodge et al., 2020; Patel et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2021). The pandemic forced people to isolate and physically distance themselves from their social networks, thus exacerbating feelings of loneliness and increasing distress (Borkoski & Roos, 2020; Patel 2020; Potts, 2021). Many researchers used Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs as a framework for understanding the disruptive effects of COVID-19 on human connections. The literature shows that college students in general have a strong need to connect with their peers, faculty, and institution (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Haddock et al., 2020; Shrestha & Rogers, 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020; Strayhorn, 2019).

From a human development perspective, social connection is an integral human need. Joshi et al. (2021) used the disaster survivor hierarchy of needs to explain people's reactions to the pandemic. The disaster survivor hierarchy of needs has six levels of needs: "food water and shelter, safety, family and friends' support, stress reaction, grief and loss, and assimilation and accommodation" (p. 20). It is paramount to take the hierarchy of needs into account while responding to the psychosocial needs of individuals. Ryan et al. (2020) explained that the hierarchy of needs is an essential tool to respond to the pandemic as it can help restore societal stability and individual wellbeing.

Strayhorn (2019) also identified a model based on Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, relating to college students' need for belonging. He defined belonging as perceived levels of support, feeling connected to peers and faculty, and feeling important and cared for.

Stankovska et al. (2021) administered the distance education learning environment survey DELES, the social presence scale SPS and the satisfaction scale SC to a sample of 280 university students taking distance classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed a strong positive correlation between social presence and satisfaction in distance learning. The researchers also identified key variables that strongly impacted student satisfaction. They highlighted the importance of balancing between fostering a healthy sense of autonomy and individual identity with continuous instructor support and peer interaction. Wilson et al. (2020) conducted an autoethnography of four students from Australia and Singapore who reflected on their experiences as graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings mirrored those of Stankovska et al. (2021) in that while students valued their agency in the distance learning environment, they felt a strong sense of disconnection and a yearning for social connections. These findings echo the ideas behind Moore's (1997) transactional distance theory.

Building on initial attempts to define distance education, Moore (1997) initiated a theory of transactional distance that transcended the meaning of distance education from simply a physical space between the teacher and the student to a pedagogical concept describing the psychological and communicative gap. Derived from Dewey's (1994) concept of transaction, denoting the interaction between the environment, individuals,

and behaviors, Moore (1997) coined the term transactional distance to highlight the importance of the structure of the learning environment, interactions between teacher and students, and the intentionality of instruction. Moore (2016) identified three macro-variables in distance learning: the structure of the learning environment, dialogue, and learner's autonomy. Moore and Kearsley (1996) noted that the physical and temporal separation between a teacher and students can be determinantal to effective communication and may create a psychological gap where actions and intentions may be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Moore (2016) emphasized the importance of creating a balance between structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy. He noted the paradigm shift from highly structured pedagogy that relies on teaching existing knowledge with limited opportunities for dialogue to a constructivist pedagogy that recognizes the necessity of dialogue as a means of knowledge creation.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize available literature related to my research topic and outline common themes. Some of the major themes that emerged from the literature review are the importance of connectivity in distance counselor education, the acute consequences of COVID-19 on students and faculty's mental and physical wellbeing, and the need to stay connected during trying times. Due to the novelty of COVID-19 and the lack of research related to its impact on counseling students' connections, I broadened my literature review to include sources from other helping professions. I structured my literature review to flow from general to specific topics in relation to my research question. The goal of my inquiry is to describe distance

counseling faculty's perceptions of faculty-student and student-student connections during COVID-19.

There is sizeable evidence in the literature that facilitating faculty-student and student-student connections is an integral best practice in distance counseling pedagogy. There is also evidence highlighting connection and community as preventative factors, mitigating COVID-19's psychosocial effects. Being a distance counseling student can be an isolating and frustrating experience, and when compounded by the isolation, worry, depression, and anxiety inherent to a pandemic, can prove to be debilitating. To my knowledge, there is no current research identifying the impact of COVID-19 on counseling students' connectivity. It is therefore imperative to explore this topic as COVID-19 continues to pose challenges to date. My research provided insight into faculty's perceptions of COVID-19's impact on faculty-student and student-student connections. It also provided some information on how counseling faculty perceived the subsequential challenges and navigated them. It is also noteworthy that learning to adapt to COVID-19 will better prepare the counseling profession for future global emergencies and disasters. Using a phenomenological framework for this inquiry was a great starting point to collect initial information that can be later built upon. I was able to gather data on a topic that is yet to be explored, paving the way for future research. I further detail my phenomenological method and how it applies to my proposed research in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of counselor educators during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding faculty-student and student-student connections. The counselor education field is growing in appreciation of distance counseling programs, which drives the need for guidance on how to implement best practices and remain in good standing with CACREP accreditation (CACREP, 2022). At the same time, recent literature on best practices in distance counselor education highlights faculty-student and student-student connections as essential to student development and program completion (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Harrison, 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020). Preliminary evidence points to the pandemic having some impact on faculty-student and student-student connections and provides the necessary data to learn about the challenges faced by faculty and the resources they used to mitigate them. This aids in advocacy efforts for both faculty and students to provide them with the necessary resources to minimize the impact of the current pandemic and potential future pandemics. For this descriptive phenomenological study, I used semistructured, face-to-face interviews to collect data from seven counselor educators.

In this chapter, I outline my research method, providing a rationale for the selection of the descriptive design to answer my research question. Further, I discuss my role as the researcher and outline my positionality and biases. I also present the methodology that guided this inquiry, discussing participants' selection, instrumentation,

recruitment procedures, participant procedures, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, I explore issues of trustworthiness and outline ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question and subquestion for this study are “What are the lived experiences of counselor educators of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited master’s programs?” and “How, if at all, does the COVID-19 pandemic affect faculty-student and student-student connections in CACREP-accredited master’s programs?” With the COVID-19 pandemic posing a variety of challenges and forcing an unprecedented change on the field of counselor education and supervision, it is imperative to identify best practices (CACREP, 2022). The focus of this study was faculty-student and student-student connections, which is outlined in the research as a best practice in distance counselor education (Harrison, 2021; Richardson et al., 2020). I used descriptive phenomenology as an initial step toward exploring counseling faculty’s experiences of the pandemic. Phenomenology requires intentionality and a full immersion in the target phenomenon to faithfully describe it in its fullness (Finlay, 2014). Descriptive phenomenology relies on these essential steps: (a) study data as a whole, (b) identify “meaning units,” (c) use a phenomenological psychological lens to reconstruct data, (d) engage in “free imaginative variation” to identify essential features of the phenomenon (Wertz, 2010). Engaging in “free imaginative variation” means to imagine the phenomenon without an identified characteristic and assess whether the phenomenon loses its essence. This final step allows the researcher to reduce the phenomenon to its essential characteristics (Giorgi, 2010).

Rationale for Chosen Tradition

To understand the lived experiences of distance counseling faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic, using Giorgi's (2010) descriptive phenomenology is necessary. Descriptive phenomenology provides a systematized step by step guide on how to conduct empirical social science research that is sensitive to psychology. As a new researcher, I based my work on a clear and systematic method that allowed me to conduct sound research that produces trustworthy results (see Finlay, 2014). Descriptive phenomenology allowed me to outline a process that can be replicated by any other researcher (Wertz, 2010). Further, through bracketing, or the setting aside of pre-existing knowledge, I allowed myself to faithfully describe the lived experiences of distance counseling faculty, therefore identifying the essential characteristics of the phenomenon.

Role of the Researcher

In descriptive phenomenology, the researcher is an instrument of the research and engages in an intersubjective process (Giorgi, 2010). Following the phenomenological tradition, the researcher begins by suspending pre-knowledge related to the researched phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). Once free from assumptions about the selected phenomenon, the researcher can engage in an interpersonal and intersubjective process to learn about the lived experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher must follow the steps outlined in Giorgi's descriptive method, beginning with looking at the data as a whole to understand it in its entirety (Shelton & Bridges, 2019) before identifying meaning units, which can be words, phrases, or expressions that represent a new meaning that had not been communicated in prior text (Finlay, 2014). The researcher

then works to find a deeper understanding of these “meaning units” while engaging in psychological reflection (Finlay, 2014). The final step is to crystallize and concentrate meanings while staying faithful to the participants verbiage (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). The researcher must describe the phenomenon as presented without attempting to fill in the blanks when the data seems incomplete (Giorgi, 2010).

Positionality

To conduct phenomenological research, the researcher’s positionality must be indicated with transparency, which includes the researcher’s identity such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, and ability that can influence the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a counselor educator and a professional who is interested in expanding the field of counselor education, I began to think about the concept of student-faculty and student-student connections when supervising master’s level students and learning about their experiences of disconnection from their faculty, peers, and institution. This happened during the time of COVID-19, when counselor education programs moved to fully online formats and counselors in training had to secure field placements that provided telementalhealth services. I noticed a common theme among my supervisees who experienced isolation and identified feeling disconnected from their professors. While noticing the experiences of isolation and disconnection that my supervisees shared with me, I felt a need to advocate for them, as indicated in the ACA Code of Ethics.

Additionally, the ACA (2014) urged counselor educators and supervisors to follow recent best practices as well as ethical and legal standards in training students and

supervisees. As a counselor educator, I wanted to make sure to educate myself on best practices and contribute to the current conversation on ethical and legal issues posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, with the recent expansion in distance counselor education, CACREP (2022) highlighted the importance of staying up to date with current standards and best practices.

Addressing Researcher Bias

Conducting rigorous research using descriptive phenomenology requires the researcher to engage in the epoché, a process through which all pre-existing knowledge is set aside to allow the researcher to engage with the data from a fresh and an untainted perspective (Wertz, 2010). As the researcher, I worked to separate myself from my prior subjective experiences and ego to view the phenomenon as an essential consciousness (see Finlay, 2014). It was imperative for me to examine my presuppositions before engaging in the research to set aside my pre-knowledge of distance counselor education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also important for me to explore the passion that I have regarding advocating for students to feel a sense of connection and belonging to their professors and institutions. I am also passionate about advancing the counseling field and ensuring that as a counselor educator, I am illuminating current issues and working to enhance best practices. This passion to expand on current best practices and update them so they remain relevant and current may influence my analysis of the data. My presuppositions may even influence my data collection phase. It was therefore critical for me to examine and bracket my prior experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Engaging in research requires alignment with ethical guidelines that protect research participants and provide the researcher with clear parameters to conduct sound research (ACA, 2014). The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) discussed issues of confidentiality, privacy, informed consent, researcher responsibility, ethical boundaries, and result reporting. Because the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout for counselor educators and may provoke traumatic memories (Christian et al., 2021), participants may have experienced intense emotions while answering the research questions. I was therefore attuned to and sensitive toward my participants' experiences and needs.

The ACA (2014) also highlighted the importance of informed consent through ensuring that participants are aware of all the parameters of the research and any possible implications. Participants provided written informed consent prior to the interviews. All my participants were adults who do not suffer from severe mental health illnesses that may compromise their ability to fully understand their confidentiality and privacy rights. I also worked to protect the identity of my research participants through limiting the amount of demographic information that I collected about them and using pseudonyms while taking memos, journaling, and transcribing interviews. Further, I rectified any identifiable information such as specific experiences that may allow others in the field to identify a participant to protect participants. I also shared my data collection and description methods to ensure that participants understand how the data were analyzed and presented. Participants could also stop, pause, or leave an interview at any chosen

moment and can discontinue participation in the research if that is what they choose to do.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Following the descriptive phenomenological tradition requires interviewing a minimum of three participants (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). Though research has suggested a range of five–20 participants and a maximum of 10 participants (Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2012), recruiting between six–10 participants should satisfy the ranges supported in the literature and ensure saturation (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). I abided by the range suggested by Shelton and Bridges (2019) and recruited seven participants and discontinued recruitment when data saturation was met.

My participants were faculty from CACREP-accredited counselor education master's programs. To recruit participants, I used the CACREP database to identify CACREP-accredited clinical mental health counseling programs. Using the “find a program” tab in the cacrep.org website, I searched for accredited master's programs in clinical mental health counseling. I then visited the websites of ten schools and noticed that five of them provide the email addresses of faculty to the best of my knowledge. I used the ones that provide faculty email addresses and reached out to thirty faculty member individually through emailing a participation flyer. I also used the Walden University participant pool and used my personal Facebook to share my flyer with my counselor educator friends and encourage them to share it with their networks.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling is a data collection method through which the researcher targets specific participants who can provide thorough and thick descriptions of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to obtain abundant information about the phenomenon (Patton & Patton, 2015). This aligns well with the descriptive phenomenology tradition as content-rich data is critical (Finlay, 2014). It was also imperative to use purposive sampling as my target population is precise. My aim was to study the phenomenon of faculty-student and student-student connections during the pandemic as experienced by counselor educators in CACREP-accredited programs. I planned to use snowball sampling by inquiring as to whether current participants would be willing to provide names of colleagues who may meet my inclusion criteria, but I was able to reach saturation with the sample identified through purposive sampling.

Criteria for Participation

Inclusion criteria for this inquiry are (a) adults over the age of 18 who are full time faculty in a CACREP-accredited master's level mental health counseling program and (b) participants must have worked as full-time counselor educators in a CACREP-accredited master's level program during the COVID-19 social distancing mandates leading brick-and-mortar schools to move to fully online instruction between March of 2020 and fall of 2021. Exclusion criteria are (a) individuals who do not speak English, French, or Arabic as these are the only languages that I understand, (b) faculty in a CACREP-accredited program that is not a master's level mental health counseling

program, and (c) faculty in counseling programs that are awaiting CACREP accreditation.

Instrumentation

The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) urged counselors and counselor educators to stay up to date with best practices to facilitate ethical and informed work with diverse populations. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the lives of counselor educators and students alike (Christian et al., 2021) and forced many programs to adopt a fully online format as different governments around the world resorted to strict quarantine protocols (CACREP, 2022). In fact, CACREP (2022) noted that the surge in distance counselor education brought on by the pandemic resulted in a new sense of appreciation to this accessible and versatile format, leading many CACREP-accredited programs to consider a permanent shift. Therefore, CACREP (2022) highlighted the importance of ensuring that these programs can maintain their accreditation and continue to fulfill ethical and legal requirements. With these recent and ongoing changes to the counseling education climate, it is of utmost importance to revisit best practices and identify how they translate into our current context. Faculty-student and student-student connections has been shown to improve student retention and success (Haddock et al., 2020; Harrison, 2021). Ongoing faculty feedback, building relationships within the classroom, and intentionally connecting with students are described by many authors as best practices in distance counselor education (Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Haddock et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020).

COVID-19 and its effects on lived experiences of different populations is still a recent topic of conversation, which warrants in-depth interviews with my research participants to collect as much data as possible. Shelton and Bridges (2019) explained that qualitative interviews are a versatile tool that allows the researcher to gage the necessary structure and use follow-up questions to dive deeper into the participant's experience. Descriptive phenomenology research requires interviews that allow for thick description of lived experiences (Shelton & Bridges, 2019), hence my interview protocol consisted of 60-minute in-depth semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to structure my interviews so that they include all important questions and simultaneously give me the flexibility to ask follow-up questions (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). This allowed me to further explore my participants' psychological experiences which is in alignment with the descriptive phenomenology tradition (Wertz, 2010). I suspended my experience as a counselor educator during the pandemic to allow for an intersubjective experience (Wertz, 2010).

Shelton and Bridges (2019) discussed the importance of asking targeted and effective questions and explained that the researcher must be a skilled interviewer. My questions are constructed in an order that allowed me to funnel information from general to specific descriptions of faculty's lived experiences (see Appendix D). Peoples (2019) highlighted the importance of only asking about experiences to remain faithful to the descriptive tradition. She also explained that semi-structured interviews are preferred in descriptive phenomenological research as they allow for a natural yet structured

conversation between the researcher and the participants. I followed up with participants two weeks after the initial interviews to conduct member checking.

Data Collection Procedure

I conducted a 60-minute in-depth semi-structured interview with each participant. While I planned on spending the entire 60 minutes collecting data, most participants reported not having any more information to add after 53-55 minutes. I used Zoom to conduct interviews and made sure that both my participants and I are in a private setting. I emailed an informed consent document to be reviewed and signed by each participant prior to the interview. On the day of the interview, I went over the informed consent document and allowed participants to ask any questions they may have had about the study. I answered their questions with transparency and clarified that they can withdraw from the research at any given moment. Further, I conducted member checking two weeks after the conclusion of interviews through providing each participant with an email detailing the meaning units that I pulled out of their respective interviews and requesting feedback. I used Zoom to see my participants and assess their non-verbal cues during the interviews and I used a separate software to record audio. I took memos immediately following each interview to record important information and observations. The Zoom meetings were not recorded for confidentiality purposes, so I used memos and journaling to capture my participants' non-verbal communication. I saved the audio files in a secure portable hard drive protected by a code.

Data Management Plan

For this descriptive phenomenological study, I collected in-depth data to align with Giorgi's tradition. One of the cardinal rules of conducting research in the counseling field is protecting the research participants' privacy (ACA, 2014). It was imperative for me as the researcher to be intentional in protecting participants' identities and any identifying information (ACA, 2014). During this study, I collected demographic information, informed consent paperwork, audio recordings, transcripts and notes that have identifying information of my participants. I worked to remove any identifying information such as names, dates of birth, institution, and role at the institution. I also foraged the transcripts for any experiences that are specific to a participant and rectify it to protect the participant's identity (Finlay, 2014). I used codes to name files containing participants' information and used pseudonyms to anonymize them. I stored all electronic data on an external hard drive that is protected by multiple passwords and authentication measures. I stored paper documents in a locked filing cabinet and used pseudonyms to refer to my research participants in my notetaking and journaling.

Data Analysis Plan

The descriptive phenomenological tradition provides very clear and sequential data analysis steps to follow (Giorgi, 2009). In concordance with Giorgi's method, the first step is to get a general sense of the data by reading through the entirety of each transcript. The second step is to practice intentionality in bracketing pre-knowledge to perceive the phenomenon as experienced by participants. Third, I began to identify meaning units generated from the data. Then, I used a psychologically sensitive lens to

reconstruct data. Finally, I used “free imaginative variation” to reduce the phenomenon to its essential characteristics (Giorgi, 2010; Shelton & Bridges, 2019).

Finlay (2014) described Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive phenomenology method and explained that transcription allows the researcher to access the minutiae of the raw data. She added that this is an intuitive and intensive process through which the researcher engages with the raw data and begins to gage meaning units. Giorgi (2010) provided an example where a transcript was a helpful tool in clarifying a miscommunication between the researcher and a participant. Further, a transcript provides a visual component that adds to the understanding of the audio recordings and makes the analysis process less challenging (Giorgi, 2009). Further, Finlay (2014) added that transcripts allow the researcher to fully engage with the data and better understand what is being described. As a visual learner, reading transcripts helped me better understand my participants’ experiences of the phenomenon of inquiry.

I engaged in an intuitive and systematic process of reading and rereading the interview transcripts to immerse myself in my participants’ experiences and practice bracketing my presuppositions (Giorgi, 2009). This helped me in working through the next step which was adjusting my attitude toward the data to align with the phenomenological psychological reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Shelton & Bridges, 2019). Shelton and Bridges (2019) explained that this may be one of the most intricate steps as it requires an adjustment in the researcher’s consciousness to perceive participants’ experiences as described and not as objects of reality. To do so, I suspended my

presuppositions of the phenomenon and looked at the raw data with a fresh and curious perspective (Shelton & Bridges, 2019).

The next step was to identify meaning units from the data. Finlay (2014) explained that meaning units are specific parts of the description that constitute a concept or a meaning that is different from past text. She further explained that meaning units are not limited to words but can also be non-verbal cues like physical gestures, intonations, and facial expressions. Shelton and Bridges (2019) noted that meaning units must reflect the participants' experiences and align with their vernacular. During this process, it was imperative to maintain my phenomenological psychological attitude to reflect my participants' experiences. Giorgi (2010) warned researchers from interpreting and paraphrasing participants' expressions in ways that diverge from their actual experiences.

Once I identified meaning units, I progressively reflected on them to uncover deeper meanings (Giorgi, 2009). This moved the data from a raw description to a phenomenological psychological description as the researcher works to pool together and integrate meaning units and rephrase them to allow for organization and theme development (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). This is where the researcher uses psychological sensitivity to move meaning units from a surface level understanding to a thematic organization (Finlay, 2014). This step is critical and laborious as it allows the researcher to condense thick descriptions into a finite number of essential themes (Finlay, 2014).

The last step is to organize themes and use free imaginative variation to determine which of the identified themes are essential. Finlay (2014) explained that this process requires the researcher to try to imagine the phenomenon without a particular theme; if

the researcher is unable to do so, then the theme is essential. Once all essential themes are identified, the researcher reflexively organizes the data in a way that provides the most faithful description of the participants' lived experiences (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). Shelton and Bridges (2019) further explained that the researcher can determine how to present and organize themes.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The original aim of the Husserlian tradition was to derive generalizable and uncontested truths about the world (Hermberg, 2006). While generalizable truths can be difficult to contend, descriptive phenomenology is a scientific method that relies on establishing rigor and trustworthiness (Finlay, 2014). Trustworthiness is an integral aspect of qualitative research and can be discussed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). A researcher conducting a qualitative inquiry must address all four components of trustworthiness to demonstrate that the research is rigorous, valid, objective, and reliable (Anney, 2014). In this section, I discuss each trustworthiness component and my plan to address it in my research.

Credibility

Finlay (2014) explained that to achieve scientific credibility, the researcher must leave an evidence trail that brings the reader closer to the phenomenon. She encouraged the use of examples and direct quotes from participants to show transparency and truthfulness. Ravitch and Carl (2016) further explained that credibility in qualitative research refers to the level of which the data reflects the experiences of the research participants. To fully immerse myself in the data and explore the participants'

experiences, I used different formats such as video interviews, audio recordings, and written transcripts. Further, Pandey and Patnaik (2014) explained that credibility refers to the internal validity of the research, which means that the study measures what it is intended to. To ensure credibility, they suggested that the researcher follow a systematic research method, ensure that participants represent the target population, triangulate data, use iterative questioning, engage in reflexive journaling, and actively engage with participants.

Transferability

While credibility is concerned with the internal validity of the research, transferability relates to its external validity; the extent to which the research findings can be applied to a larger population (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). It is critical to demonstrate that the results of my study are relevant to the population at large and not simply confined to my participants (Peoples, 2021; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure that my results are transferable, I provided thick descriptions of my data and ensured that my participants are representative of the target population (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Dependability

Dependability relates to the data's ability to remain relevant and consistent over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). An inquiry is dependable when it answers the research question and is consistent in the data it elicits (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Pandey and Patnaik (2014) explained that a researcher can establish dependability by providing a very thorough trail that itemizes each step taken during the research so that any other researcher can replicate the study. Further, Shenton (2004) explained that credibility and

dependability are closely related and achieved through similar methods, therefore, when credibility is ensured, so is dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the researcher can present objective data although qualitative researchers do not claim objectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This means that intentional steps were taken by the researcher to ensure that findings truthfully reflect the participants' lived experiences and verbiage and do not include interpretations by the researcher (Padney & Patnaik, 2014). This is in alignment with the descriptive tradition where the researcher must bracket any presuppositions and refrain from interpreting or translating the participants' lived experiences (Wertz, 2010). Confirmability is therefore about presenting data that is a direct reflection of the raw data and demonstrates researcher neutrality (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure confirmability, I emailed my participants clear descriptions of my syntheses of their interviews along with the meaning units that I pulled from them. I then requested that my participants provide feedback relating to the accuracy of my meaning units. All participants confirmed that the meaning units that I identified accurately represent their experiences.

Ethical Procedures

I am a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor who is bound by the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) in conducting research. Before beginning my research, I requested the approval of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviewed my research plan and ensured that it aligns with current ethical research standards. Protecting participants from harm is of utmost importance. I ensured that my

participants entered into my research agreement willingly and were thoroughly informed of their rights and the research process. I sent an informed consent document to each research participant prior to the interview. Before beginning the interview, I reviewed the informed consent and answered any questions that my participants had.

The focus of this study was faculty-student and student-student connections, which is not inherently a sensitive topic to discuss. And while the context of the research is the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants seemed to have adaptively processed the experience and were not triggered by talking about it. COVID-19 brought on many challenges and increased anxiety, depression, and trauma (Christian et al., 2021). Many people lost family members and experienced fear for their health and safety (Arici, 2020; Barden et al., 2020; Brashear & Thomas, 2020). It was therefore important to acknowledge the possible effects of COVID-19 on my participants and develop an intentional and sensitive approach to my research. I let my participants know during the informed consent process that the research is related to the topic of COVID-19 and that they will have to discuss events that occurred during the quarantine. I maintained attunement to my participants during the interviews to anticipate their needs and ensure that they remained stable throughout the process.

I also worked to protect my participants' information and keep their documents in a safe and secure place. Informed consent documents contained reminders that my participants are free to withdraw from the study any time they choose to and can stop, pause, or end the interview if they need to. None of my participants showed discomfort throughout the interview, so there was no need to pause or end any of the interviews.

Further, I offered resources in the informed consent such as the national hotline for any participant who may become upset and would wish to seek counseling to process the experience. I used pseudonyms in all formal and informal writings and kept all documents (digital and physical) locked safely.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the design and method that I used to conduct my inquiry. I discussed the procedures I used to select participants, explaining my rationale for using purposive sampling. I also described my process to sample, collect, and manage data and outlined data analysis. Finally, I explored issues of trustworthiness and described ethical procedures that I took into consideration during my study. In the next chapter, I provide the findings of my research.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to describe counselor education faculty's lived experiences of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited counseling programs. The research question and subsequent questions directly addressed this purpose. In this chapter, I describe the setting, demographics, and data collection and analysis, then discuss the trustworthiness of the study and outline its results.

Setting

I conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. This method allowed me to recruit and interview participants from different universities and geographical regions. All seven participants reported feeling comfortable using this technology as they use it frequently for work and outside of work. There was no reported discomfort, and we did not encounter issues in conducting the interviews.

Demographics

I interviewed seven participants and gave them pseudonyms using the letter "P" for participant and a numerical designation that matches the order of the interview. I collected demographic information to ensure that participants met my inclusion criteria and to enhance the credibility and transferability of the results. Table 1 outlines participants' demographics.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Data*

| Participant | Gender | Ethnicity | Years as Counselor Educator | Licensure |
|-------------|--------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| P1 | Male | Caucasian | 5 | LSC |
| P2 | Female | Caucasian | 23 | LPCC |
| P3 | Female | Caucasian | 9 | LMHC |
| P4 | Male | Chicano | 5 | LPC |
| P5 | Female | Caucasian | 17 | LPC |
| P6 | Male | Caucasian | 10 | ACS |
| P7 | Female | Caucasian | 18 | LCMHCS |

Data Collection

I interviewed seven participants who were recruited through purposive sampling using a digital flyer. Though I listed snowball sampling as a possible recruitment tool and two of the seven participants requested to share my recruitment flyer with colleagues, the number of participants recruited through purposive sampling was sufficient to reach data saturation. I collected data using one-on-one interviews via Zoom. Interviews lasted an average of 55 minutes and ended when participants expressed that they had nothing else to add. I recorded the audio using the Voice Recorder app and Otter.ai to account for malfunctions. I encountered no issues with the audio recordings; however, I encountered a malfunction with my computer's audio during the last interview where I was not able to hear my participant. I resolved this issue through calling the participant over phone and using that for audio while continuing to use Zoom for video.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in descriptive phenomenology takes place through five sequential data analysis steps outlined by Giorgi (2009). The first step is to read through the entirety

of each transcript to get a general sense of the data. While initial data consisted of audio recordings in its original format, transcripts provided a raw and visual representation of the data which engages different areas of the researcher's brain, therefore allowing a more comprehensive and imaginative processing of data (Giorgi, 2009). I read each transcript and allowed myself to be fully immersed in each participant's experience. This initial step can be completed using the researcher's natural attitudes and does not require intentionality in scrutinizing the researcher's understanding of the data (Shelton & Bridges, 2019).

The second step is to assume a phenomenological reduction position. The process of phenomenological reduction is ongoing throughout data analysis as the researcher continues to engage in conscious bracketing of intrusive preunderstandings. Though researchers must engage in epoché, they equally ought to be mindful of their horizons as these cannot be bracketed and can limit the researcher's ability to realize the phenomenon in its fullness (Peoples, 2021). It is also important to have intentionality throughout data collection and analysis.

The third data analysis step is to break down the transcript into what Giorgi (2009) called meaning units. While continuing to assume the attitude of phenomenological reduction, which allowed me to extract meaning from the participants' experiences without the influence of my preunderstanding of the phenomenon, I began to identify meaning units. I read each transcript and broke down the information into succinct descriptions that reflected each participant's language and experiences. The meaning units reflected the way participants experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as

counselor educators. I paid close attention to the participants' perceptions of faculty-student and student-student connections during the pandemic, as well as their perceptions of COVID-19's effects on faculty, students, and the learning environment. Using comments in a Word document, I broke down each paragraph of each transcript into main themes. Then, I used highlighting to color code themes that fall within the same meaning unit. For example, I used green for themes related to faculty-student connections and yellow for themes pertaining to student's needs. I then transferred all meaning units from all transcripts into one document pooling related themes together.

One of the hallmarks of descriptive phenomenology is using a psychologically sensitive lens to reconstruct data (Giorgi, 2009). After identifying initial meaning units, I engaged in an in-depth analysis to filter them through a psychological lens and identify phenomenologically informed descriptions (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). Doing so allows the researcher to move meaning units from surface level information to a thematic organization of condensed and essential themes (Finlay, 2014). This step is a central component of Giorgi's method as it moves the data from thick descriptions and hundreds of meaning units to a delimited number of themes (Finlay, 2014). To do so, I used the meaning units from the previous step and used a psychological lens to identify the underlying themes. For example, though some participants used the term "attunement" others discussed the same theme while using wording such as "paying attention to students' needs," which I pooled together under the psychological theme of attunement. Another example would be the essential theme "creativity." Though Participants 1, 6, and

7 specifically used the term “creativity,” other participants discussed using creative tools such as music, podcasts, graphics, and humor to engage students.

The final step in data analysis is to use free imaginative variations to identify which meaning units are essential then organize them in a way that accurately represents the participants’ experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Shelton & Bridges, 2019). During the process of free imaginative variations, the researcher can pull from existing knowledge and experiences to try to imagine the phenomenon without certain themes and assess if it loses its essence (Finlay, 2014). I began with 23 meaning units that I identified across the seven transcripts. I used level headers in Microsoft Word to organize the 23 meaning units and pasted quotes from each participant under the appropriate header. This gave me a visual representation of how many participants shared the same thoughts about each meaning unit and helped me conduct the process of free imaginative variations through identifying the most salient themes. I was therefore able to distill the units into six essential themes: the pedagogical shift, focus on students’ needs, loss of face-to-face opportunities for connection, fostering connective engagement, balancing leniency and boundaries, and faculty need for supportive leadership. Identifying the essential meaning units informed the structure in which I wanted to present them. After organizing the meaning units, the researcher must create a structure to facilitate the reporting of findings (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). For this study, I developed a list to represent the themes that I identified and a visual representation of the subthemes in the meaning unit “fostering connective engagement.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

While collecting and analyzing data for this study, I paid close attention to issues of trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). To ensure credibility of my findings, I selected participants who met my inclusion criteria and had information pertinent to my research topic. Further, I triangulated data through combining the original interviews with an extensive review of audio recordings and written transcripts (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There was no change from what I reported in Chapter 3.

The transferability of data relates to the extent to which the research findings are representative of the larger population (Pandey & Putnaik, 2014). To demonstrate that my findings are relevant to the larger population of counselor educators and not simply confined to my participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), I constructed eight questions guided by my research question and used all of them in the same order with each participant. I asked follow-up questions as needed to expand on the information provided by the participant or for clarification. Future researchers can use the same research questions (see Appendix) to replicate the study. I was able to maintain this structure in my interviews. Follow-up questions varied depending on the information provided by each participant; however, the main eight questions as well as their sequence remained the same.

Dependability relates to the consistency of data and its ability to remain relevant over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Following Pandey and Patnaik (2014)'s recommendations, I established dependability by providing a clear description of the

steps that I took to analyze my data and shared documents—all seven transcripts and the sheet that I used to organize the raw meaning units—with my dissertation chair. This ensures that my research can be replicated in the future.

To ensure the confirmability of my data, pr evidence that the findings are representative of the participants' experiences and are not contaminated by the researcher's bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), I conducted member checking. I provided each participant with the meaning units that emerged from their interview and requested feedback on their accuracy. All participants confirmed that the meaning units accurately represent their lived experiences.

Results

The question that guided this descriptive phenomenological inquiry is “What are the lived experiences of counselor educators of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited master’s programs?” Additionally, I used a subquestion of “How, if at all, does the COVID-19 pandemic affect faculty-student and student-student connections in CACREP-accredited master’s programs?” All participants talked about their awareness of the necessity for a pedagogical shift, leading them to exploring, researching, and trying different modalities. This awareness of the need for effective pedagogy that mitigates the unprecedented difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic increased the participants' awareness of their responsibility to understand and mitigate students' changing needs. All participants talked about the loss of face-to-face opportunities for connection as an obstacle that affected both students and faculty, leading to increased intentionality in creating

environments that foster connective engagement between students and faculty and amongst students. This intentional focus on students' needs and creating opportunities for engagement came to my participants with a sense of responsibility to balance their empathy and understanding of students' experiences with ethical and professional boundaries. All participants noted that they practiced intentionality in holding space for their students' experiences while maintaining their roles as counselor educators. It is notable that faculty had to navigate many challenges during this time such as navigating the pedagogical shift and students' ongoing concerns, while also experiencing the sequelae of the COVID-19 pandemic and holding space for their own experiences of grief and isolation. All participants shared that they turned to their university leadership for support during these challenging times and highlighted the importance of supportive university leadership.

The data provided six themes, with the theme "pedagogical shift" generating one essential subtheme and the theme "focus on connections" generating four essential subthemes that I organized into a visual representation to display their interconnectedness.

Theme 1: Pedagogical Shift

All participants highlighted the importance of matching pedagogy to the learning environment and while participants who were already teaching in distance counselor education programs (P2, P3, P5, P6, and P7) recognized that their programs had the infrastructure in place to address COVID-19, they also identified essential changes to their pedagogy to meet the unforeseen demands. P6, who works at a distance counselor

education program stated, “You know, the environment is shifted. So, your instructional techniques need to shift.” He then added,

so, I mean, this is about pedagogy as much as there’s anything else, that you need to understand the environment that you’re working in. The resources that your students have and the techniques that you can leverage to have them be able to really understand and use the material We’re looking at behaviors, professional behaviors, dispositions in particular. So, we have these three different pillars that we have to rely on as part of our assessment process, and our pedagogy needs to meet that. So, it needs to be able to assess for and then provide instructional support for all three of those things, those skills, those dispositions, that content knowledge.

Participants 1 and 4, who teach in two separate land-based institutions talked about using flipped classrooms as a way of adjusting their pedagogy to meet students’ needs. P1 stated,

but during the pandemic, knowing just zoom fatigue, I did like a flipped classroom style. So, I would record lectures ahead of time, have students watch the lecture, and then we’d have two hours together to discuss and go over additional material. But, there was no reason for students to have to watch me do a lecture that was going to be very similar to what I could record. So, I would just record that just to try to keep the interaction more fresh, because by about the one hour mark, people were already checking out. So, you know, the two-hour mark was a lot already to ask.

Participant 4 shared similar sentiments to the use of flipped classroom:

I'll start recording lectures and start really diving into these alternative ways of learning. I've always been interested in a flipped classroom where all lectures were recorded for us to engage with at home and then the class time we actually spent just doing homework and using the professor as a resource.

Participant 7 who teaches at a distance counselor education program expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for counselor educators to revisit, reassess, and enhance their pedagogy, she stated:

I think that COVID allowed those of us that work primarily in online institutions, I think it gave us a lot of opportunity to reflect on what does work. But I think it also has been more opportunities for us to look at how other people have done things. And that there's other ways ... But when other institutions had to start looking at online learning, I think it just opened options and opportunities for us, as online educators to really recognize that there there's always 10 different ways to get to the same end result. And that we should open ourselves up to the possibility that there might be better ways to accomplish things and do things. I think it just broadens opportunities for growth within the online setting.

While discussing the importance of matching pedagogy with the demands and resources of the learning environment, six participants talked about changes to their gatekeeping practices. Gatekeeping is instrumental to ethical counseling pedagogy (Brashear & Thomas, 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a).

Subtheme: Gatekeeping

Six of the seven participants naturally talked about gatekeeping as an integral part of their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic shift to fully online instruction. Although none of the interview questions asked about gatekeeping, Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 discussed the influence of the pandemic on their roles as gatekeepers. This theme was brought up naturally and without probing, which I specifically refrained from after noticing it emerging during the first three interviews. The fact that six of the seven participants reflected on gatekeeping shows that it is a conscious component of their experiences of the studied phenomenon.

It is important to note that gatekeeping was not intended to be a topic of focus for this inquiry. Neither the research question nor the eight interview questions asked about gatekeeping during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, six out of the seven participants brought up gatekeeping organically, and five out of the six expressed concerns about proper gatekeeping in distance education or distance residencies while one discussed the possibility of effective gatekeeping in distance counselor education. P6, P5, P3, P2, and P1 talked about the challenges of assessing dispositions properly via Zoom. P2 explained,

So, when we were in person with residency, frankly, you know, you can read body language you hear students talking in the elevators in the halls. And none of that, of course happens on Zoom. You know, someone could actually probably not but they could, I mean, if push came to shove, they could probably be shopping while we were, you know, on the Zoom call, so I just think, I firmly

believe we cannot do proper gatekeeping there's just too many things that we miss.

She added, "we can't do, I personally and many of my colleagues agree we can't do adequate gatekeeping on Zoom. It's just not possible."

P1 noted,

But there was a sense of like, Oh, should we be doing like, is there a point at which this isn't just flexibility? This is a student who's actually really struggling and if they were in person, they would absolutely be flagged? I think there was some difficulty there.

Similarly, P6 stated,

there was more opportunity, I think, to assess for dispositions when we had students in person, and they had to essentially be that counseling professional for 8-10 hours a day as opposed to a couple of hours a week online.

Further, P5 noted,

I think we all feel like not getting to do skills training in person, especially with a master's students, it puts us at a disadvantage. Or gatekeeping. You know, a lot of times the things we notice if we notice any red flags in our master students, it would be in between class or it would be like off to the side during class.

She further provided this example:

And it wasn't anything in her counseling skills. It was what I was observing off to the side and in that hotel, one day she went to dinner and I think it was something like she had an allergy to a specific food. And then she got a little bit of that food

and claimed to have an allergic reaction, and then was threatening, like yelling and threatening to sue the hotel. Well, that's a big dispositional problem, but it's also a legal issue. And so when I found out about that, I went to one of our disposition folks, kind of the people that the faculty members that help with these issues, and we had a meeting with her and we got her on a plan. We talked to her about her behavior, and the last day, she really pulled it together. It was a lot more appropriate, a lot more focused and professional.

P3 noted the lack of policies in place for proper distance gatekeeping:

I'm also on gatekeeping, I'm on the gatekeeping committee, and we saw different kinds of things come up that way, I think specific to practicum and internship students doing telehealth, maybe for the first time the scramble to figure out policies around that.

At the same time, P7 talked about opportunities for proper distance gatekeeping, which is a topic of further exploration and research. She explained that when she conducted online residencies as weekly two-hour long meetings with students as opposed to a weekly intensive in-person residency, she had a longer time to assess students' dispositions on a weekly basis for ten weeks. Meeting with the students weekly for the length of the term gave P7 more time with the students and enhanced her ability to assess their dispositions, strengths, and areas of growth. She noted that this method, coupled with small group sizes, allowed her to connect better with students and better understand their needs.

It is evident that all participants made intentional efforts to focus their energy and resources on supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, naturally, they

talked about the support and resources that they found either helpful or lacking during these testing times. All participants shared recognizing the need for a pedagogical shift or adjustment, they also all highlighted the importance of focusing on students' needs.

Theme 2: Focus on Students' Needs

All participants acknowledged that students' needs shifted drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and highlighted the importance of meeting those emerging needs. P1 talked about existential uncertainty which spread fear and anxiety amongst students who were uncertain about their ability to complete the program or fulfill their internship requirements. P3 talked about COVID-19 hijacking the learning environment and becoming a main topic of discussion as students' anxieties peaked. All participants noted that they quickly realized that their students were struggling with unprecedented challenges and that they needed to focus their efforts on attending to their changing needs. P6 stated,

I think during the pandemic, there was more focus on ensuring that students had the resources they needed to navigate the challenges and issues that were present.

So, I think there was kind of a renewed focus on connection and support, synchronous time and availability than there might have been in the past.

He then added,

So, we had to pivot our instructional practices, not just from a pedagogy standpoint, but to meet the needs of students who are now experiencing this traumatic event in their day to day lives. That could impact their ability to learn

and to function in the classroom. So, there was this uptick in focusing on providing that opportunity for support and resources and connection.

Similarly, P3 stated,

There was a lot of so much anxiety at the beginning, so much, needing to check in so much, people needing extensions, people feeling overwhelmed, people dropping classes, people disappearing, there was that element to it... but I think the biggest thing that stood out was the need for reassurance. And extra support and patience.

P3 also shared that COVID-19 created opportunities for faculty to enter students' homes through Zoom and experience how the lockdown exacerbated existing familial issues.

She shared an anecdote about a student who, during a class on Zoom, forgot to hit "mute" and engaged in a verbal altercation with a family member which escalated to verbal abuse and threats. She also talked about students feeling isolated, which was echoed by P7 who stated, "Just isolation a lot of students that were very quick to say that they really looked forward to our meetings because they were really isolated." Further, P4 talked about changing his approach to meet students' needs:

I think for me, I felt like I was doing something that was tailored to their needs because that their needs changed. That flexibility was sensitive to what those changes were.

While identifying students' needs, all participants identified face-to-face connection as an important area of focus.

Theme 3: Loss of Face-To-Face Connections

The loss of face-to-face connections affected both students and faculty. For land-based programs, the loss of face-to-face connections was a drastic deviation from their pre-COVID functioning, while distance programs were mainly affected in relation to residencies and internships. All participants reported that faculty and students alike were affected by the loss of face-to-face connections. In fact, P5 shared worry that distance counselor education programs may adopt distance residencies as they are cost-effective: “So, I really feel that in person component, even in an online program is really important. And we lose something important.”

P5 added that faculty connections and the accessibility of colleagues in in-person residencies is such a critical component of effective distance counselor education. P7 echoed these thoughts and shared that having direct access to other faculty during residency is a very important tool:

residency just to be able to during a break, pull somebody else aside and say like, Am I crazy? this is what’s happening, should I have this response? And honestly, able to get super helpful consultation and supervision from a peer in that moment, versus, you know, after the fact where, you know, it’s like, instantaneous, like, it’s like you can and you can kind of say like, Hey, listen, this is what’s going on and have a peer say, hey, why don’t you try this or, you know, versus if you’re online and you’re kind of in that group with your people and we would have a meeting every other week. And so, it might be two weeks after something happened that

I'm talking with a peer, unless I intentionally reached out to somebody on my own.

P5 shared this experience of feeling supported during in-person residencies:

the sense of ease of you talking about ideas and talking about, you know, what's not going well for you like what do you need from the group and getting excited about classes or teaching, sharing ideas, problem solving our student issues. When we got to meet in person, stuff would happen really naturally. Now, it's like I have to think to call someone or ask a question or send an email and I don't always do it.

P6 also talked about in-person residencies as opportunities for distance faculty to have direct access to one another: "There was a lot of opportunity to consult with one another, to have those conversations, to lean on one another for support. And just ideas and resources."

P1 and P4 who are faculty in land-based institutions talked about the loss of happenstance interactions amongst faculty and with students. All participants also shared noticing that the loss of face-to-face interactions affected students as well. P1 stated,

So, for example, one of my favorite parts of in person learning is having students be able to like, they get there a little bit before class, and they're like, oh, is anyone watching, you know, whatever, on Netflix, oh, my god, I just feel like those little discussions that happen. Whereas for zoom, people would get their class starts at 6:55, people sign in at 6:54. So, that was loss a little bit in terms of student interactions. And then, you know, we go on a break halfway through and,

typically, students will stay in the room and just chat with each other. Whereas, on Zoom, people shut their cameras and mics off and they're gone.

P4 highlighted faculty interactions with students as integral to effective pedagogy and explained how his daily face-to-face interactions with students were beneficial to him:

So, prioritizing free time towards something else and students just they weren't really all that interested in stopping by my virtual office. And so that was a big change up I had less contact with students, which I depended on, you know, it was a good way for me to keep the temperature of my group and know how to sort of adjust my pedagogy as I go on.

With the loss of face-to-face connections, all participants grew mindful of the need to create opportunities to connect with students.

Theme 4: Fostering Connective Engagement

Although faculty-student and student-student connections is the central phenomenon of this inquiry and I as the researcher specifically asked participants to discuss the topic, it is important to note that all participants validated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, connections became a central focus of their work with counseling students. P6 stated,

I definitely saw an uptick in students who wanted that connection. Who wanted to be able to meet and talk synchronously over the pandemic. And I think part of the reason for that was we were very isolated. They didn't have the same supports and resources maybe externally that they might have had or at least in the same way that made those connections more important.

Similarly, P5 noted,

For me, I have found that's what I want to be working on. It's not technology, it's that connection. It's building relationships with my students. It's seeing them as individual people.

Several participants talked about the importance of creating opportunities for synchronous connections. P7 shared,

I mean, I just think flexibility. I think just not being not being afraid to break through the online narrative that doesn't require connection in some ways. And stepping outside of behind the camera and maybe doing some live things and taking the time and I think if you give the students 15 minutes, and you sit with them and talk to them and support them, that's gonna go a long way versus an email or versus just a short response.

P3 also shared,

I would say I as far as my master's students, a little more of one-on-one time spent with them. That you know, meetings that would sort of be supervision meets teaching meets, just connecting you know, not as an official faculty and advisor, just a person you know, and I think there's only a certain kind of student that will reach out and ask for that.

In fact, P2, P3, and P4 explained that while all students seemed to share similar struggles and need increased opportunities for connection, it appeared as though a specific category of students reached out to faculty and took advantage of the resources and support. P3 and P4 suggested that students' traits, personalities, and backgrounds play a role in their

support seeking behaviors, while P2 noted that students who take accountability for their learning and want to excel typically take advantage of all available resources.

Further, all participants indicated that faculty-student connections are mutually beneficial. P1 and P4 talked about the day-to-day contact with students in land-based counselor education that is refreshing and not only keeps them feeling connected to their students but also provides them with essential feedback. P6 shared,

There's this isolation part of it and then leaving feeling more connected. I should mention too, because I feel like it goes both ways. Right? So, it did impact me positively having more of those connections. I love teaching online. Love it for several reasons. But one of the things you do miss is having that regular contact with students. And I think that provided that for me too, and actually helped me cope with that additional contact-less opportunities to connect with students.

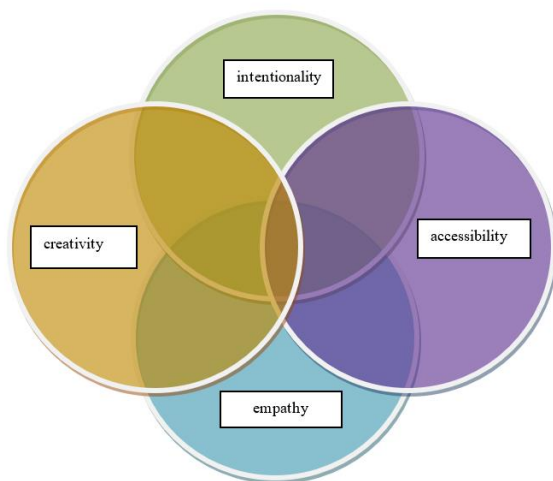
He later added,

I truly believe that the relationships that we forge with our students and with each other as colleagues are that linchpin in education. That is, where we should focus our time and our energy, our resources, in better understanding how we develop those professional relationships, to support students to support one another, and to create those environments that are going to allow future helping professionals regardless of where they live. Their access to education, you know, and their opportunity. I really think that is the crux of where we should be headed as a profession and online education.

All participants identified techniques and tools that they used to create and maintain strong connections with counseling students during the pandemic. I was able to divide these tools into four main themes depicted in Figure 1 and explained in the following section.

Figure 1

Fostering Connective Engagement in Counselor Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Intentionality

All participants noted that with the alterations in the infrastructure of programs and faculty pedagogy, along with an ongoing pandemic exacerbating students' anxieties and resulting in unprecedented challenges and needs, it was imperative for faculty to practice intentionality amongst all areas of their teaching, with a keen focus on connections. P7 stated,

I do think that you know, in a time when things were all over the map just them having that consistency and awareness I think was really helpful and I love to

send emails and I love to give clarity and direction and I got a lot of positive feedback from students about like, thank you so much for being so clear. Thank you so much for providing this example. Thank you, you know, that kind of thing, which I think in the past, I've had people that like, oh my god, you sent so many emails. But I think they actually appreciated it a little bit more probably than they had in the beginning.

Similarly, P5 stated,

I started being much more mindful and much more intentional about how I built connection with students in the classroom. So like, one of the first things I did was I made a video and I can send you a copy of it if you want to see it, but I made a short two minute video. And it used to be called Adobe Spark and now it's called something else but it's like it's got music and graphics. There's no, there's no talking in it, I don't think. But it's just like, Hi, I'm ... and it shows a picture of me. Here's some things I like to do. Here's me at a wedding. Here's me painting the walls of my house. Here's my dog, and here's me zooming with my family and it was more about I'm a real person. I'm going through this just like you I'm really excited to be here with you.

P1 captured the essence of what all seven participants shared about intentionality really well in this statement,

I think with the technology available, you can be as effective as a counselor educator, if you are intentional, and you create the opportunities for the same types of interactions you would have in person.

It was agreed upon by all participants that with intentionality, there is a real opportunity to create strong connections that both students and faculty can benefit from.

Creativity

Participants talked about a variety of approaches to foster connections with students such as the use of humor, technology, music, podcasts, hobbies, and interests, which I pooled together under the theme “creativity”. Each of the seven participants found their own way to pull from their interests and talents to activate their creative sides and connect with their students in meaningful ways. P1 used technology to create simulations of real-life situations and created raps and music to facilitate students learning. P2 used the available technology to engage with each individual student. P3 tailored the group process of eye movement desensitization and reprocessing EMDR to fit her students’ immediate needs. P4 created podcasts to share informative content in fun and easy to digest ways with students. P5 created interactive videos, while P6 and P7 used humor. P6 shared,

I’m thinking of a post right now is an old Zelda game. It says It’s dangerous out here, take this and it has a little character in it. And then the image that I put in instead of what was traditionally a sword was the APA manual, for citations and whenever I’m talking about proper APA format and citations. So, just silly things like that, that I think just add something they personalize it they make it your own are really helpful

P4 stated, “I remember students being really appreciative of a recorded podcast episode or recorded lectures, because it was actually me talking and not just discussion more, for example, or things like that.”

P1 shared how he adapted the privilege walk to the online environment:

For example, the privilege walk, I had to creatively find a way to have this activity feel the same and create the same level of, honestly, discomfort for some people too so I realized saying that, I want the discomfort to be for people who have never considered privilege, to have that moment of like, Oh, wow, I guess I didn't realize the extent to which privilege isn't just white privilege. It's also body type privilege. It's also gender privilege, it's sexual orientation, right. So that reflection had to happen. And the physical way in person, very easy for that to happen. And I think digitally you know, doing it digitally. The reflections were just as deep and I still do it digitally to this day, because I think it's a safer way to do it and again, creates the same level of reflection.

Accessibility

All participants talked about the importance of being accessible to counseling students during and outside of the pandemic. Participants talked about accessibility, availability, and vulnerability, which I pooled under the theme “accessibility.” P6 stated,

I found myself thinking a lot more about how do I make sure I'm available? How do I make sure that I'm accessible? Not just for content, but for support. So, you know, I used the term earlier, but it did it stretched me in a good way. And it

developed a lot of practices that I think now have improved my ability to connect with students to make the online course experience meaningful.

P7 also shared, “I think accessibility, you know, just I don’t think for me personally, I don’t think it was just more accessibility like being accessible, being open being flexible being available.”

P2 shared that accessibility pays off and helps students succeed:

We provide them with our at least I do my cell phone, and I encourage text because I see it right away and/or email. I see it immediately on my phone. But I am just really old school that way. I’m very responsive to my students. And I think it pays off, I mean, not just in their evaluation, just me, but I see it in their grades too.

P1 also talked about the importance of vulnerability and accessibility as faculty:

You can be like, silly and that’s okay. And I think that breaks down a little bit of a barrier, especially being a white guy, right? I recognize the power differential, so it’s like being really intentional about, listen, I’m very approachable, please don’t feel like you can’t approach me. I think that helps.

All participants echoed P1’s views on vulnerability with students and shared that vulnerability creates deeper connections. P6 stated,

I think that it became more central for me to share more about who I am as a person as a counselor educator. In my own ways of coping with the pandemic.

Allow that connection to happen more freely, more easily. felt more inviting, and those are things I’ve carried forward.

Empathy

P4 noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was “an equalizer”, making faculty and students experience the same circumstances and share similar struggles. All participants explained that while as a counselor educator, they are wired to be naturally empathetic and understanding, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged them to unlock new levels of empathy. Some of the participants talked about attunement as well, which I pooled under the umbrella of empathy. P2 shared,

I learned to think I was pretty empathic anyway. But I think I you know; it just heightened my awareness if that makes sense. Yeah, you know, to be as supportive as I could be, but I tell them I have parameters, and I have guidelines that I have to meet.

Similarly, P6 stated,

So there's so much empathy in this for the student who's working to do the same things that I did once upon a time. So, I have to watch that boundary really carefully. And at the same time, really work to establish those connections so that they know there's a resource for them and a place to reach out to.

P5 also noted,

So, I really learned that when I sort of work with them, and I'm a little more fluid with regard to what they need, they meet me there, and I didn't have the experience I negatively anticipated which was people are going to try and take advantage of it.

Further, P1 shared:

It's hard to engage completely academically when there's an existential crisis going on every single minute of every single day. So, I think that, again, is where we shifted more towards wellness and being able to, you know the material, you did the reading, we don't need to reiterate it, if you need to revisit it, reread it later, but like, really connecting with people instead.

While all participants shared becoming extremely attuned to students' needs during the pandemic, they also identified recognizing their roles in maintaining professional boundaries.

Theme 5: Balancing Leniency and Boundaries

All participants talked about the pandemic stretching their inherent ability to practice empathy and flexibility with students. And while leniency was necessary, all participants also recognized their continued responsibility to ensure that students were receiving proper education. P7 and P3 highlighted the difficulties of balancing all different roles during the pandemic while being required to stay grounded and professional as faculty. P7 stated,

I mean, I think that the biggest challenge for me as a counselor educator, was to be grounded and solid in my role as a counselor educator, when I was experiencing the same thing that my students were experiencing and figuring out a way to show up for them and to be consistent and to be present.

Similarly, P3 added, "When I think back at that time, I feel like I was running in circles. Having to appear a lot more ... regulated."

All participants shared that while they were practicing leniency and empathy with students as the circumstances dictated, they were also navigating ways to stay grounded in their roles as counselor educators. P6 and P3 talked about providing students with resources to fulfill their mental health needs. P6 stated,

So we're gonna throw a disclaimer in because I feel like this is a helpful point. I think when we talk about connection, there has to be a clear line between Counselor Educators and providing clinical services, right. It's in the ACA code of ethics. That, you know, we don't provide clinical services to students. But that doesn't mean as faculty we can't be supportive, that we can't connect with students professionally in a meaningful way. And I think that delineation is really important because students were struggling with the mental health impacts of COVID-19. So part of that connection had to include our ability to provide those resources for them.

P4 talked about using the discrimination model of supervision to ground himself in the different roles:

I parallel a little bit to my supervision model where we have these different roles that we carry in that space. One is consulting, one is teacher and one actually, counselor, I definitely found myself like really just attending to their personal lives. You know, like, don't worry. Please again, going back to that same student whose parents were hospitalized. Please spend as much time as you can, like preparing for that. If this deadline comes and goes, we'll figure that out.

Similarly, P1 shared,

But I think as counselors and Counselor Educators, I think we have, we just tend to be more sensitive and more flexible anyway. So, I think that in some ways, it was like, oh, yeah, they'll be fine with it. And it's like, yeah, I'm fine with it. If it's something that, if something comes up, and you're unwell, yeah, I get it. But don't schedule work. When you know, you're supposed to be in class, I think students struggled with the shift to online not being a free for all, because there's still standards in place.

He added,

I was very flexible, so as soon as like, hey, I'm not feeling well today. Is it cool if I have my camera off? Yeah, that's fine, engage to the extent that you can engage, right? So, and that and right at the same time, that can become a slippery slope, because then it's like, oh, cool. They've got their cameras off. Because there is a tipping point at which I'm talking to a room of no faces.

With the growing awareness of the importance of maintaining professional boundaries during the pandemic, many of my participants talked about their roles as gatekeepers.

Theme 6: Faculty Need for Supportive Leadership

Similarly, to gatekeeping, faculty need for supportive leadership was not an intentional topic of discussion for this inquiry, however this topic came up naturally during each of the seven interviews. Two of the participants reported feeling very pleased with how their university leaders responded to the pandemic and provided consistent support, while participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 expressed disappointment with the lack of direction and focus on faculty needs. The following testimonies from participants made it

clear that counselor educators function best when they receive proper support from university leadership.

P1, P2, and P5 expressed confusion and lack of guidance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported that leniency policies were either too lenient or confusing.

P1 noted,

And the double-edged sword there was that our university didn't give us a lot of guidance. So, on the one hand, there was a lot of freedom, they were like, do whatever you want, do whatever makes sense for your classes. But with that, there was a lot of, again, uncertainty of like, okay, and what does that look like? What are my options?

He added that with the lack of unifying guidelines, each faculty member created individual policies that were arbitrary. He also talked about the uncertainty about whether CACREP will make concessions for students in practicum and internship, then finding out that there will be no concessions and having to meet CACREP requirements without resources to help students complete their hours.

Similarly, P2 shared her frustration with the university policies:

and the leniency policy. The first one that came out was absolutely wide open. It was like, you're excused, no matter what. They definitely tightened that up and said, you know, you've got to let your instructors know if you're going to be missing, not after, but even if they let us know after, we were encouraged to give leniency and understand which we did.

P5 also shared,

we're asking you to extend deadlines for students and really I think there was some pushback from faculty, some of the faculty you know, we talked to each other about like, Is this okay? are we just going to encourage sort of students to slack off or does that mean we have to grade stuff even months after the term is over? You know, people kind of got really dramatic about it. I didn't have that experience. I felt okay. with it.

P3 expressed feeling discouraged by the university leadership's response to her request for time-off after struggling with health concerns:

And when I had to ask for some help, and accommodations around that, I felt like it cast me in a bad light Because it was sort of this like this, this leadership culture of let us know how you are, let us know your needs. And then I took a risk and shared it and the message was like, Well you better get that together pretty soon, you know, that it felt punitive and judgmental.

Further, Two of the seven participants expressed feeling disappointed and discouraged by their institutions' leadership's disregard of the murder of George Floyd. They explained feeling sad when their universities' leadership did not address the issue and shared that it alienated African American faculty and dismissed the needs of students of color.

P6 and P7 expressed feeling content with the way that their university leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. P6 stated,

And I think we have some really fantastic leadership too that were able to facilitate those conversations and make sure those opportunities are available. I think just personally at home making sure that I was walking the same line I was

feeding to my students about self-care and about the need for those connections and those resources so that when I was self-evaluating, I did what was necessary to be in a position to provide that service that support in my role.

My interview questions revealed multiple important themes that call for future research and exploration. In chapter 5, I will further discuss the implications of my research and identify recommendations for future research.

Summary

Connections are an integral part of effective counselor education, which became increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the need to adjust pedagogy, become fluent in the use of emerging technology, and understand the new demands of students, counseling faculty had to navigate many challenges while maintaining professionalism and a focus on students' needs. In the final chapter, I will discuss the findings, limitations, and implications of my study, then I will make recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this descriptive phenomenological inquiry, I explored the lived experiences of counselor educators of faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited master's in counseling programs. I recruited seven counselor educators from two land-based and two distance counselor education programs. Five of the seven participants were teaching online prior to the pandemic, and two were teaching in land-based institutions. I conducted semistructured interviews to elicit thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of inquiry. Using Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, I designed my questions to allow me to delve deep into the world of each participant as they described their experiences of COVID-19's effects on faculty, students, the learning environment, and connections. Following data analysis, I condensed my participants' experiences into six essential themes: the pedagogical shift, focus on students' needs, loss of face-to-face opportunities for connection, fostering connective engagement, balancing leniency and boundaries, and faculty need for supportive leadership.

My goal with this research was threefold: solidifying the literature that identifies connections as an integral aspect of distance counselor education, exploring some of the effects of COVID-19 on faculty-student and student-student connections, and increasing the knowledge and awareness of the different tools that counselor educators use to create and maintain connections in the online learning environment. In this chapter, I outline the findings on my study while connecting them to the literature where applicable. I briefly review the conceptual framework that I used. I describe the limitations of the study. I

further provide recommendations and discuss the implications of my findings for counselor education, research efforts, leadership and advocacy, and training/education.

Interpretation of Findings

This study resulted in a variety of findings. Two of the six essential themes and subthemes were organically brought up by the research participants and present opportunities for future research. I noticed those two themes emerging following the first three interviews, however, I practiced intentionality in staying true to the purpose of this inquiry and strictly abided by the research questions. I did not probe or ask questions about the two themes unless the participant brought them up and there was a need for clarification or further explanation. I will begin by discussing the five expected themes and connect them to existing literature. Then, I will discuss the two unexpected themes: gatekeeping, and faculty need for supportive leadership.

The Pedagogical Shift

Pedagogy in counselor education is an ongoing topic of research and exploration. It is evident in the counselor education field that the continuously changing circumstances and learner demands require ongoing considerations of effective pedagogy and best practices (Chen et al., 2020b; Sheperis et al., 2020a). It is important to have a clear understanding of what constitutes effective distance learning pedagogy (Chen et al., 2020b). My research participants echoed these sentiments and outlined the strategies that they used to ensure effective education. All participants shared that since COVID-19 was unprecedented, and there were no guidelines in place by the university or CACREP to follow. They explained that they had to rely on their knowledge, experiences, peer

consultation, and largely their individual efforts of trial and error. Participants also explained that though universal guidelines were lacking, especially in regard to leniency policies, they were encouraged by their university leadership to do whatever they deemed necessary to ensure sound pedagogy. This gave some of them the freedom to explore new teaching outlets such as in the case of Participants 1 and 4 who used flipped classrooms. Participants who taught in distance counselor education programs prior to the pandemic reported varying levels of change to the learning environment depending on the courses they were teaching. For these participants, most of the curriculum was built to be taught in a fully online environment, which did not change during the pandemic, or as Participant 3 put it “it was business as usual.” However, four of the participants who were already teaching in a distance program had to pivot their in-person residencies to an online environment. These participants identified that the shift in the environment required a pedagogical shift. Participants who taught in brick-and-mortar institutions prior to the pandemic identified the necessity of shifting their approach to meet the emerging needs of students and maximize the benefits of the learning environment.

Gatekeeping

Within the context of ethical and sound pedagogy, six participants discussed the shift in their roles as gatekeepers. The ACA (2014) defined gatekeeping as an ongoing process through which counselor educators assess students’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions to ensure their fitness for the counseling profession. Gatekeeping was an unexpected subtheme as the focus of this study was on faculty-student and student-student connections, and none of the interview questions asked about this topic. Six

participants naturally brought up gatekeeping in response to my questions about the changes to the learning environment and faculty struggles. Five out of the six participants expressed the difficulties of gatekeeping in a fully distance program. Those who teach in distance counselor education programs noted that they used to have myriad of opportunities for gatekeeping during the in-person residencies and revealed concerns about adequate gatekeeping in distance residencies. The literature discussed the importance of gatekeeping in distance counselor education and argued that in-person residencies provide an operative environment to assess students' skills and dispositions (Sheperis et al., 2020a). Five out of the seven participants agreed that it is harder to assess students' dispositions online. Participant 1 shared that during a Zoom meeting, a student can simply turn off their camera for some time and the professor would have no idea what the student is doing. Participants 2, 3, 5, and 7 shared that during in-person residencies, there are many opportunities to assess students' dispositions outside of the learning environment as well as access colleagues who can provide immediate help with student concerns. Participant 6, however, stated that it is easier for him to see all students at once during a Zoom meeting, which helps him pay attention to all students' dispositions and needs. Participant 7 further mentioned that there are many opportunities for adequate gatekeeping online and shared that when she divided her class into two small groups, with whom she met weekly for 10 weeks, she was able to better connect with each individual student and understand their strengths and needs. She suggested that with further understanding of the available technology and the online learning environment, it may be possible to identify parameters of effective gatekeeping.

Focus on Students' Needs

All participants acknowledged that during a time of tragedy and global uncertainty, students' immediate needs took precedence over educational timelines. This echoes the literature that highlights the importance of focusing on meeting survival needs as a foundation for meeting higher levels of needs such as self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). In fact, some researchers used Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs to explain students' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss the importance of shifting the focus toward meeting their foundational needs like well-being (see Joshi et al., 2021). Participants explained that they shifted their focus to the well-being and stability of their students as they recognized that learning happens best when the student is regulated. Numerous research studies on the effects of COVID-19 on the well-being of college students identified consequences such as increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Arici, 2020; Barden et al., 2020; Brashear & Thomas, 2020; Christian et al., 2021), burnout syndrome and PTSD (Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022), and a general decrease in quality of life (Heider, 2021). Participants identified the importance of attunement to their students' needs and some of them discussed recognizing the variance in how COVID-19 affected students from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Participant 3 talked about students who are mothers, who had to attend to their children's needs while balancing their academic and vocational responsibilities during the quarantine. She also discussed how the quarantine exacerbated existing symptoms of domestic abuse and violence and recognized the importance of balancing her role as the counselor educator while providing those students with the necessary resources.

Loss of Face-to-Face Opportunities for Connection

Though distance counselor education programs conducted most of their courses online, these programs faced an unprecedented loss of face-to-face connections with COVID-19, resulting in the cancelation of in-person residencies. It is important to note that the five participants who are distance counselor educators seemed to derive a lot of joy from the in-person residency experiences as they felt connected to and supported by their colleagues. All five participants talked about the loss of direct access to their colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic and some of them continue to grieve this massive loss as their program did not reinstate in-person residencies post pandemic. In-person residencies are an integral part of distance counselor education, heightening students' experiences of support and connection as well as reducing isolation (Ruscitto et al., 2022). This experience is also critical to faculty connections amongst themselves and with students. In fact, one of the participants shared that she contemplates leaving distance counselor education because of the loss of direct access to her colleagues.

Fostering Connective Engagement

All participants validated the necessity of creating and maintaining connections with students as a precursor to students' well-being and success in the program. In fact, Participant 3 stated that students who create and maintain a learning community excel. This is consistent with the literature that shows that effective distance counselor education relies on creating connections between faculty and students and among students (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Snow & Coker 2020; Snow et al., 2018). The literature also shows that students who perceive a sense of

connection with their peers and faculty typically report a positive experience and successfully complete the program (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Harrison, 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020). My research participants outlined the tools and techniques that they resorted to in order to navigate the pandemic's threats to connections. All participants reported that they were more empathetic and understanding toward their students' needs and experiences. They also reported that they practiced intentionality in engaging with their students and adjusting their teaching styles to meet their immediate needs. All participants also talked about being more available, accessible, and vulnerable with students. They explained that these strategies humanized them and made them more approachable to students. Finally, participants shared creative tools that they used to adjust their pedagogy and make the most out of the available technology.

Balancing Leniency and Boundaries

All participants shared that their respective universities' initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic was an open-ended leniency policy. As students were navigating traumatic circumstances, it was clear that they needed time to adjust and meet their basic needs before they could focus on learning. Participants shared that though they were naturally lenient, empathetic, and understanding, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged them to new levels of empathy. They shared that they were similarly affected by the tragic consequences of COVID-19, which allowed them to connect with their students on a deeper and novel level. But they also grew more aware of their professional obligations and practiced intentionality in separating their roles. Participant 6 talked about abiding by the ACA (2014) ethical standards in separating his roles as counselor and counselor

educator. He explained that though he was able to hold space for his students and listen to their struggles and needs, he recognized that his role was to provide students with the necessary resources as opposed to counseling them. This is consistent with the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* that highlights the importance of forming positive relationships with students while maintaining ethical boundaries to avoid causing harm. Participant 4 shared that with the lack of a model in place for these unprecedented circumstances, he pulled from the discrimination model of supervision (see Bernard & Goodyear, 2014) to support him in staying grounded in his role as a counselor educator.

Faculty Need for Supportive Leadership

All seven participants talked about recognizing the importance of shifting their attention to students' needs in the aftermath of the social distancing mandates ensuing from the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared concerns about their students' wellbeing as they navigated unprecedented challenges such as loss of employment, increased familial stress, loss of housing, and health concerns. All seven participants recognized that they had to hold space for their students' needs while experiencing a collective trauma and having personal and professional struggles themselves. All participants also identified the need to turn to university leadership for guidelines and support while navigating these complex challenges. The faculty need for supportive leadership was another unexpected theme as it was not intentionally asked about. However, all participants talked about turning to their university leadership for guidance and support while working to maintain faculty-student connections and focusing on students' needs.

In a pre-COVID-19 research article about counselor education programs moving from a land-based to an online format, Hale and Bridges (2020) identified disparities between university leaders' expectations of counseling faculty and the level of support they provide to them. While some of my research participants acknowledged that the university leaders were facing unprecedented challenges and were understanding of the ones who did not put helpful parameters in place, others expressed disappointment and discontent. Two of the participants shared feeling disappointed with how their university leaders responded to the murder of George Floyd amidst the pandemic. They explained that their university did not dignify the tragedy and failed to attend to the needs of Black faculty and students. One of the participants further shared her discontent with her university leadership's response to her request of time-off. She reported feeling judged and rushed to get better. Two other participants from a shared institution expressed gratitude toward their university's leadership and noted that their response to the COVID-19 pandemic solidified their commitment to their faculty, students, and community. The two participants expressed the joy of working at a program where leadership cares about its employees and students. These results solidify the need for university leaders who attend to the needs of their faculty and students, especially when faced with tragic events.

Limitations of the Study

For this descriptive phenomenological study, I recruited seven participants and was able to reach data saturation, therefore fulfilling the central requirement for a qualitative study (Shelton & Bridges, 2019). The participants shared their lived experiences of being counselor educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six out of the

seven participants identified as Caucasian or White and one participant identified as Chicano. Four participants identified as female, and three participants identified as male. The sample used for this study lacks ethnic diversity and is limited to two genders. This means that the results of this study are limited in generalizability to the main racial group represented by the research participants, which is Caucasian counselor educators. It is also limited to two genders: male and female. The results of this study cannot therefore be generalized to counselor educators of other racial and ethnic groups and gender identities. Further, it is noteworthy that the sample is comprised of counselor educators that can only speak to their experiences of student-student connections as observers. It is therefore critical to explore this component from the perspectives of students as they experienced the phenomenon directly.

It is also important to note that most participants worked in distance counselor education programs prior to the pandemic with only two participants teaching in land-based programs. Further, this study included four universities out of the 929 that currently offer a CACREP-accredited master's program in a counseling related field. Another notable limitation is that six of the participants live in the East Coast and one participant lives in the West Coast, leading to a lack of geographic diversity.

Finally, it is important to note that I share a similar background with the participants in that I am a counselor educator who taught master's level students in a CACREP-accredited program during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this shared experience, I was mindful and intentional in bracketing my pre-knowledge during the early stages of data analysis, then paid close attention to my horizon while interpreting

results (Finlay, 2014). In fact, my horizon heightened my psychological sensitivity while analyzing my data which increases scientific rigor (Giorgi, 2009).

Recommendations

This study is limited in the size and diversity of the sample. Six of the seven participants identified as Caucasian, and one participant identified as Chicano. It is important to explore the lived experiences of not only other Chicano faculty but also faculty with other racial and ethnic identities. According to the CACREP vital statistics (2017) almost 15% of full-time faculty in CACREP-accredited counseling programs are African American/Black. The literature indicates that African American/Black communities were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, African American/Black individuals experienced higher rates of SARS-CoV-2 infection and mortality related to COVID-19 (Okoro, 2022). Various factors contribute to this disparity, notably systemic racism, higher prevalence of pre-existing conditions, and the underutilization and limited access to health care (Okoro, 2022). Slay et al. (2022) talked about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic as three Black women who are social work educators and identified the disparity in support and resources available to them. Similarly, two of my participants shared sentiments of anger and frustration with their university leaders' lack of response to the murder of George Floyd that took place in May of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing mandates. Participant three shared that due to the lack of responsiveness from her university's leadership, all Black faculty resigned as they did not feel safe and supported. It is therefore critical to explore

the experiences of African American/Black faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic as it differs massively from other racial groups.

The sample is also limited to faculty who identify as male or female, requiring further research including faculty members with diverse gender identities. Further, the study explores the phenomenon of student-student connections from the perspective of faculty, which seemed to provide data that is limited to faculty observations. In fact, one participant said that he does not know much about student-student connections as he had limited opportunities to witness them interacting with each other. Due to the lack of in-person activities and residencies, faculty did not have many opportunities to witness students interact, leading to the need for further examination of this topic using students' lived experiences as a central source of data. It is also important to note that only two participants taught in land-based programs and moved to fully online instruction during the pandemic. Their experiences of the pedagogical shift are largely different from the five participants who were already teaching online and require further examination.

Counselor educators recognize the need for an ongoing examination and amendment of best practices to ensure the production of effective counselors (Chen et al., 2020b). They explained that due to the ever-changing nature of the learning environment, counselor educators must increase their awareness and knowledge of best practices in counselor education. While this inquiry focuses on connections as a best practice in distance counselor education during the pandemic, there are many other best practices to be explored within this context. In a pre-COVID-19 study about best practices in distance

counselor education, Snow et al. (2018) identified six main best-practices with faculty-student-community engagement as the most agreed upon standard.

This study yielded some unexpected results, with the topics of gatekeeping and faculty need for supportive leadership identified organically by participants. To remain within the scope of my research, I only asked necessary questions about the two topics then redirected the interviews to the purpose of the inquiry. University leadership and support or lack thereof appeared to influence faculty's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who felt supported and cared about reported feelings of satisfaction while those who felt inadequate support from university leadership reported feeling disappointed and dissatisfied. Gatekeeping is an ethical responsibility for counselor educators and must be further explored within the context of distance education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Brashear and Thomas (2020) explained that gatekeeping is more complex in distance education and requires intentional and effective communication with students and observation of their dispositions and skills.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of counselor educators of student-student and faculty-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic in CACREP-accredited master's programs. The study was limited to four CACREP-accredited institutions which leaves room for future research with universities that are not CACREP accredited as well as a larger selection of CACREP-accredited institutions. There is also an opportunity to focus the research interests on a specific type of program: distance, hybrid, or land-based. The interviews were conducted almost two years after the quarantine resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants

appeared to have adaptively processed the pandemic for the most part and used a strengths-based approach to report what they learned from their experiences. As a result, the recommendations I made focus on concerns that they brought up.

In addition, gatekeeping is an enormous responsibility and duty for counselor educators as they must ensure that counselors in training are equipped to meet their clients' needs in ethical and culturally competent ways. While six of the seven participants in this study brought up the issue of distance gatekeeping, their mixed views call for further research. All six of the participants recognized the difficulty of distance gatekeeping. A few of the participants even shared examples of student dispositional issues that came to light during in-person residencies and reflected that those students would likely not have been flagged during a distance residency. They added that gatekeeping is also easier during in-person residencies as faculty has direct access to other faculty who can support in identifying if a student's comportment is concerning. At the same time one participant noted that when using a gallery view on Zoom, he is better able to see all students at once and assess their dispositions simultaneously, which is harder to do in person. Another participant noted that gatekeeping can be done effectively online and shared her experience of getting to know students on a deeper level through weekly meetings. More research is needed in this area as there are no clear guidelines for effective distance gatekeeping in counselor education.

Faculty need for supportive leadership was brought up organically by participants although it was not probed by the interview questions. Two of the participants, who work for the same institution, shared feeling grateful for the support that they received from the

leadership of their university. They both shared admiration for the university's president's commitment to students, faculty, and the community, which seemed to enhance their vocational satisfaction. Other participants talked about university leadership's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported feeling confused with the open-ended leniency policies allowing students to submit late assignments without clear guidelines in place. Further, two of the participants who work for different institutions shared their disappointment in their university leadership's dismissal of the murder of George Floyd. This seemed to decrease their satisfaction with their institution and plant a seed of worry about the future. Finally, one participant stated that she felt judged when she shared needing time off for health reasons and called out the university leadership's lack of following through with their identified values of self-care and compassion. While these experiences were not a focus of this study, they are important to explore in future research as they pertain to vocational satisfaction and feeling supported and cared for by university leaders. It is therefore reasonable to consider future research that explores university response plans that emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic, and to further investigate university leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of their adapted measures.

Implications for Social Change

There is a growing body of literature identifying faculty-student and student-student connections as a best practice in distance counselor education (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Snow & Coker 2020; & Snow et al. 2018). In fact, the research shows that students who perceive a positive sense of connection with their

peers, faculty, and university are more likely to succeed in distance counselor education (Bridges & Frazier, 2018; Dixon-Saxon & Buckley, 2020; Harrison, 2021; Snow & Coker, 2020). When experiencing a global pandemic that presented unprecedented challenges and exacerbated existing struggles, it was increasingly important to continue to provide effective counselor education and produce well-rounded counselors. In fact, one of the participants of this inquiry reported worrying about providing subpar education during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the ethical obligations that counselor educators have toward the field. One of the major social implications of this study is the importance of understanding students and faculty needs and identifying ways to meet them during challenging circumstances.

Students' Needs

All seven participants identified witnessing their students experience and navigate complex and unprecedented challenges. The literature echoes these findings as several published research articles on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students show devastating consequences on the physical and mental wellbeing of college students (Gay & Swank, 2021; Shafiq et al., 2021; Maurya et al., 2020). Findings of this study highlight the importance of increased awareness of students' needs, especially minority students and those who are at high risk for increased domestic abuse. For example, participant three shared witnessing a verbal altercation between a student and her partner and identified the importance of paying close attention to individual students' needs and concerns. She also talked about students who are mothers and had to balance between work, school, and home-schooling during the lockdown. All seven participants

highlighted the importance of making themselves available to meet with students individually to attend to their unique needs. These findings further underscore the importance of recognizing students' diverse backgrounds and making time to connect with each student individually. This will allow faculty to meet students' needs in multiculturally competent ways.

Faculty Needs

Coaston (2019) explained that vocational satisfaction is integral to counselor education. She noted that counselor educators must balance between many roles and maintain their wellness practices as they model proper self-care to their students. She identified faculty support, person-environment fit, autonomy in the workplace, and university culture as predictors of faculty satisfaction. Further, she added that social support and accessibility of colleagues can protect faculty from burnout. COVID-19 resulted in isolation, lack of interpersonal connection and support, and an increase in stress and burnout (Gay & Swank, 2021; Shafiq et al., 2021; Thomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2022). Most participants in this study identified feeling disconnected from their colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic, with one participant sharing that the grief of losing that support is making her consider leaving distance counselor education. All participants seemed to ground themselves in focusing on students' needs and how to be effective counselor educators during the lockdown, so they did not share much information about their individual struggles and the supports they needed. However, it was prevalent throughout the interviews that counselor educators derive a lot of satisfaction from peer connections and university leaders' support. The findings of this

study highlight the importance of meeting these faculty needs while they navigate challenging circumstances. Counselor education programs should therefore pay close attention to and further explore supportive measures and preventative factors to increase faculty wellbeing and decrease burnout.

Connections

Another major implication for social change that emerges from this study is the importance of fostering connective engagement in the distance learning environment and during a global pandemic. One of the participants shared that counseling students who find a community and stay connected throughout the program excel. The research shows that faculty-student and student-student connections are a precursor to students' retention and success (Lu, 2017). Connections make students feel seen, understood, and cared for (Warren, 2022). By creating and maintaining connections with students, faculty can better identify and address students' needs. Participant seven explained that when she divided students into smaller groups with whom she met on a weekly basis, she was able to get to know each student on a deeper level, which helped her identify individual strengths and needs. Creating connections through intentionality, empathy, creativity, and availability can be a powerful tool that addresses individual students' needs. By intentionally engaging in identifying individual students' needs, faculty can better display multicultural competence. As participant four stated, it is important to focus on the needs of students who tend to fade away in the background just as much as those who are vocal about their needs. Participant three further explained that cultural differences may contribute to students' support seeking behaviors. She noted that the nature of distance

graduate programs is that they attract students from across the country and all walks of life; some maybe confident and well versed in understanding and using available resources, while others can be isolated and inexperienced in self-advocacy. This further highlights the importance of understanding the cultural diversity of the online classroom and increases the importance of attunement to individual student's needs.

Best Practices

While this study did not focus precisely on best practices in distance counselor education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the results highlighted important best practices that faculty relied on. First, all participants noted the importance of matching pedagogy to the learning environment and students' demands. Brashear and Thomas (2020) highlighted the importance of recognizing the difference between face-to-face and distance education. They explained that merely shifting the same assignments and pedagogy from an in-person format to an online format is not enough to provide students with the necessary guidance during the pandemic. All participants discussed ways in which they ensured effective pedagogy through making changes to adapt to the new circumstances. Chen et al. (2020b) discussed the importance of congruence between the content, pedagogy, and technology to effectively deliver online materials. Ensuring adequate counselor education that relies on specific best practices facilitates positive social change through producing effective counselors who provide sound and efficacious services to the public (Chen et al., 2020b; Snow & Coker, 2020). Some of the best practices outlined by all participants are: 1) adapting pedagogy to the learning environment and students' needs, 2) focusing on students' needs, 3) focusing on creating

and maintaining connections, and 4) staying grounded in the counselor educator role.

These findings can provide counselor educators with insight on effective practices should we face another pandemic or common tragedy. It is important to note that these best practices are limited to the scope of this study, which focused mainly on connections.

Conclusion

The field of counselor education relies on ethical guidelines and best practices to remain in concordance with accrediting bodies' requirements (Haddock et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2020). With the recognition that our society is ever evolving, leading to changing students and clients' needs, it is important for the field to grow simultaneously. Distance counselor education moves counselor education beyond the barriers of brick-and-mortar institutions, increasing flexibility, accessibility, and affordability (Dixon-Saxon & Buckely, 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020; Sheperis et al., 2020a). While some counselor educators remain skeptical about the effectiveness of distance counselor education, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all institutions to move to an online format (Brashear & Thomas, 2020). CACREP (2020) reported that distance counselor education continues to grow in popularity which makes research on best practices even more essential. There is a growing body of literature supporting faculty-student and student-student connections as a best practice in distance counselor education, especially in relation to the isolating nature of the modality (Haddock et al., 2020; Snow & Coker, 2020). With COVID-19 increasing social disconnection and isolation and moving all counselor education programs to an online format, it was imperative to explore the topic of connections within the pandemic's context. I began this research to explore the lived

experiences of counselor educators in relation to faculty-student and student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the findings of this study, there is sizeable evidence that distance counselor education can be conducive to positive connections between faculty and students and amongst students, even amidst a global pandemic. Findings also show the level of commitment and care that counselor educators exhibit toward the field, their students, and their communities. Further, findings show that while the pandemic presented unprecedented obstacles to connections, faculty were able to rely on tools like intentionality, creativity, availability, and empathy to meet their students' needs. All participants shared that even though the pandemic presented them with novel challenges, it also generated opportunities to enhance teaching practices.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Introduction and Review of Informed Consent

Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Fatma, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University, in the Counselor Education and Supervision program. This interview is part of a qualitative research study for my dissertation. My research project examines the lived experiences of faculty in CACREP-accredited master's level counseling programs during the COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to faculty-student and student-student connections. This interview will take 60 minutes and consists of eight questions regarding your experience in connecting with students during the pandemic. Your responses will be used in writing a qualitative research study, which will be published as a doctoral dissertation and research article. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the study and article, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous. Do you have any questions?

As we begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are recording this interview so that I may accurately record the information you convey.

I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this project. You received and acknowledged an e-mail from me, which contained information about this project, certifying that we agree to continue this interview.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. In the event you do choose to withdraw your participation, all information you provide, including this recording will

be destroyed and omitted from the final paper. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. Please describe in as much detail as possible your experience of being a counselor educator during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Please describe in as much detail as possible if and how COVID-19 challenges affected you as a counselor educator.
3. Please describe in as much detail as possible your experience of how you perceive COVID-19 challenges affected your students.
4. Please describe in as much detail as possible your experience of COVID-19's effects on the online learning environment.
5. Please describe your experience of faculty-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. Please describe your experience of student-student connections during the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. Please describe in as much detail as possible any challenges you may have experienced to student-student and student-faculty connections during the pandemic.
8. Please share anything about your experience as a counselor educator during the pandemic that you feel is important for me to know?

Closing Information

Thank you for the time that you have generously shared with me. I will be transcribing our interview and will analyze the data. I will reach out to follow up with you after reviewing the transcript if there are additional questions, which will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me using the information that was included in my initial e-mail inviting you to participate. Thank you, again, for your time.